

Rocky Impulse Control

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My dog Rocky has no impulse control. Whenever he sees a squirrel, he barks so uncontrollably, you would think something catastrophic was constantly happening right outside my family room window. When he sees a cat while we're out walking, he'll bark ferociously and strain on the leash to get close to it. But if it starts walking toward him, he'll start yelping as if he's being murdered. When he wants to go out, he rings the bell hanging from the front door incessantly. If I don't yell "slow" when I open the door, he'll rush out of the house so quickly that even with an 18 foot leash, he will pull me with him in seconds. If a truck goes by he will lunge at it. When he's hungry, he'll walk over to where the treats are and stare at me til I feed him. If he's lying next to me and I move, he will groan loudly because I have disturbed his sleep.

My dog Rocky has no social graces. He has put me in numerous awkward social situations. Once when we were walking around our neighborhood I saw a man up ahead wheeling something that to me looked like a device to measure the sidewalk. When we met him at the top of the hill I said oh, are you measuring the neighborhood? He said, no, this is my daughter's scooter. We just moved in last month. I'm just waiting to pick her up at the bus stop.

I can't tell you how embarrassed I was. I apologized and wanted to slink away as quickly as possible. But my dog decided to lie down and roll on his back so the man could pat him. I kept yelling in my head, come on, let's go! But he wouldn't budge.

Some may say Rocky is poorly trained. I say he is a free spirit.

Yom Kippur, our Day of Atonement is all about examining our own impulses, our ability to control our behavior and act in an unrestrained way to better the world. To return to being unabashedly ourselves and loving unconditionally.

On this day we reflect upon how often we impulsively growl at others who push our buttons. How impatient are we when we don't get what we want when we want it. How often have we not read the room, and jumped in with an unfiltered comment. How likely are we to act out our impulse to help another person? To not second guess our desire to dive in and volunteer to extend our support? How often have we hidden our authentic selves instead, restrained our true feelings for one another?

Jewish tradition tells us that God imbues us humans with two additional impulses, the impulse to do good, the *yetzer hatov*, and the impulse to do evil, the *yetzer hara*.

On this holiest day of the year we are commanded to evaluate how much and how often we have had the same lack of impulse control as my dog, and the degree to which we adhere to the standards of Torah. Today's Torah portion is a powerful reminder that on this day we stand before God to renew our covenant. That we have a choice between giving in to our animal impulses or following God's laws. That we have the ability to choose life for ourselves and others, by living up to our God-given highest moral standards of behavior.

Today we evaluate how we need to be less like my dog when it comes to giving in to our needs-based impulsivity, and, at the same time, how we all would be better if we emulated his genuineness and unadulterated love for others and life itself. Last month while I was up in New Hampshire, I took my dog for his usual morning walk. As usual, I was half asleep. As usual we walked down the hill from my condo and as usual, Rocky suddenly decided to lie down in the sun on the sidewalk and refuse to move.

All of a sudden, a woman approached us with her dog. We had seen each other once or twice before, but she was a total stranger. The only thing she knew about us was that Rocky has the tendency to bark at other dogs when we walk by them. She shouted in a confrontational kind of tone, "which way are you walking because whichever way that is, I will go in a different direction." I thought this was an odd

question because we clearly weren't walking anywhere at the moment. Rocky was lying down and refusing to move. I was half asleep and I honestly didn't care where we would go next. I also didn't understand why she couldn't just walk by knowing that he would bark for about five seconds and then stop. So I just said that I didn't know which way I was going right now. From out of nowhere, this total stranger started yelling at me in the most officious, obnoxious voice. You are the master. You can't allow your dog to control you. You are the one who has to lead him. Now tell me right now where you are going so I know which direction to walk.

I was shocked. I couldn't believe how belligerent this person was. It rattled me for the rest of the day. And wouldn't you know it, we ran into her and her dog again late that same afternoon. We were nowhere near her when she started yelling at me again. "You're using the wrong leash. You're letting him run around too much. You're the master. Control him! Get a shorter leash!"

An uncontrollable bark. Unbridled animosity. Total lack of self awareness, concern or sensitivity of how our words impact another. There are so many examples. How often does a hurtful word, gossip, a criticism, escape the filter of our brain? How often do we impulsively yell at someone for no good reason? *Al chet shechatanu*, for the sins we have committed, by not stopping our tongues from lashing out at others, insulting everyone from a family member to a total stranger, spreading rumors, passing judgment. For not stopping ourselves from stretching the truth, for not stopping to help someone in need.

We have been the victim, the perpetrator and we have also been the witness of how the *yetzer hara* has been running rampant in our country and the world during this past year.

A couple of days ago, Ellen Finkelman sent me a message from the Jewish Federation of Rochester. Over Rosh Hashanah, there were two fake bomb threats at Rochester area synagogues. These were just two of the over 50 bomb threats, called swatting, which just occurred at temples across the country. Swatting has

become a commonly known term over the past year, meaning that someone will call in a fake bomb threat causing the swat team to be deployed to the location. Last month Neo Nazis rallied outside a hotel in Woburn where refugees were being housed.

The evil war in Ukraine which goes on and on. The evil power of a crowd who stormed the capital on Jan. 6th. Those who compromise the wellbeing of this planet for personal gain. Those who would take away the rights of others because they don't agree with their lifestyles or their choices. Judging someone's character by the color of their skin or their ethnic or religious background.

Unlike the other members of the animal kingdom, we have the capacity to hurt everyone from ourselves, those with whom we are the closest, to total strangers, to society, to the planet.

But we also have the ability to unleash our *yetzer hatov*, our inclination to do good, and not stop ourselves or second guess our desire to do *tikkun olam*, repairing the world.

There are ways in which we would do well to be more like my dog.

These past few months my faith in humanity has been restored by witnessing all the ways in which people have impulsively jumped to bring goodness into the world. I have witnessed people living out the words of our Haftarah today, go out and right the wrongs we see around us, help those in need, unshackle the chains of bondage.

72 hours after I put up a Facebook post asking for help with the Haitian refugees, I had collected over \$1700. My Venmo app kept dinging all night with people rushing to get me money. The day after I put out a notice in my neighborhood that immigrants needed clothes, toys and diapers, neighbors were leaving me all kinds of bundles in front of my garage and thanking me for the opportunity to help.

We bemoan the rise in anti-Semitism. But I will never forget the outpouring of support from our interfaith friends after the Pittsburgh shootings. The poster from the Islamic Center the imam personally brought us, signed by members of his community. White roses from a stranger. A filled sanctuary. People standing outside the door with lit candles.

Every time we feel downtrodden by yet another antisemitic incident, we remember how many friends we have who are ready to impulsively jump into action and support us. They are a powerful example for us of how much of an impact we can make on others who are oppressed by giving into this same impulse.

Though I am not the biggest fan of having to write my high holy day sermons while my dog incessantly barked his head off at the squirrels outside my window, I admire his pure heart and his ability to be himself at every moment. When that nasty woman started shouting at me my mind went into overdrive trying to come up with a response which would not escalate the situation, but let her know how inappropriate she was behaving toward me - everything from mind your own business, get a life, to at least my dog isn't an automaton like your dog. But, knowing that this was the perfect type of incident that I could use as an example in a Yom Kippur sermon and that was how I was going to get my ultimate revenge, I held my tongue as long as I could. When I couldn't take it any longer, I muttered I'm sorry you're so angry.

While I was going through all these mental gyrations, Rocky just wagged his tail. My dog has a *layv tahore*, a pure heart. He approaches every human being as if they were a long lost friend. He is genuinely himself at every moment. He never second guesses his actions. He unabashedly approaches each person with love. He is 100% loyal. He has no insecurities, no competitive streak, no need for gain. He is not striving to achieve any goal in life, other than a piece of cheese or chicken. He is the essence of goodness.

He loves me unconditionally. If I get frustrated by his behavior and yell at him, he will put his ears back and slink away. But that is always short-lived. He doesn't

hold a grudge. He passes no judgments. Wouldn't it be the ultimate victory of the *yetzer hatov* if all of our human interactions and relationships were like this?

I admire his priorities in life. He is constantly excited by nature. All it takes is a chipmunk or a squirrel or a rabbit for him to be overjoyed. He is fascinated by the smell of a leaf or a blade of grass. If we had one iota of this enthusiasm about nature, our lives would be so much better. Maybe then we would work harder to save our planet.

And this purity of spirit is the goal which can help us in our quest to minimize our evil impulses and help us walk down the path of righteousness.

I hope my dog never stops being exactly who he is. He helps me remember who I am, how to be excited by life, have unbridled enthusiasm for nature, to love conditionally, to have not one judgmental bone in his body, to never stop being a loyal companion, to always be excited to see people, to be a pure soul in this world where the *yetzer hara* has way too much control.

We will all continue to have Rocky moments, with a capital or small "r", in the year ahead. But may they be mostly ones in which we rush to do good, have unmitigated joy for life, be our genuine selves and love unconditionally.