

# A Holy Force That Takes Hold of Us

The Yetzer HaRa - יָצֵר רָע

A week ago, my husband and I were sitting at dinner.

He said: Name ONE person you know **WELL** who isn't difficult.

We both sat in silence....

Maybe our silence reflects **OUR** choice of friends and family – but I doubt it.

We're all a little bit difficult – including me! (So says my husband...)

We're difficult because life is difficult and it's hard to be human.

During the next 9 days – from today until the end of Yom Kippur – I invite you to **lean into admitting** that **you too may be a bit difficult**.

Part of *teshuvah* work is **wrestling** with our difficult parts - our **shadow sides** - the sides of us that fuel some of our **challenging, questionable, or problematic behavior**.

Forgive me if this sermon doesn't apply to you – I give you permission to leave – and take a break.

For the rest of you who are staying... Let's do what I love doing – some **Jewish text study**.

You don't have to have any prior knowledge to participate.

Everyone here is on equal ground.

The only requirement is to bring an **open heart and mind**.

We're going to look at a handful of texts about our **Yetzer HaRa** –what's usually translated as our “evil inclination” but that's too simple an explanation. It's a **powerful, animal-like life-force** that's on the one hand **necessary to sustain the world**, and on the other hand **extremely dangerous when left unchecked**.

According to the rabbis – the *Yetzer HaRa* is the **source of our challenging actions**.

(Pass out sheets)

We won't be reading through every single text – I might summarize them when we get to them. But you can take them home and sleep with them under your pillow.

Let's start at the beginning. The creation of humanity....

### Genesis 1:27 & 1:31

And God created humankind (הָאָדָם) in the divine image, creating it in the image of God (בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ)— creating them male and female (זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם) ....

And God saw all that had been made and found it **very good** (טוֹב מְאֹד).

### Genesis 2:7

God **formed** (*va'yitser*, נִיָּצַר, root word יצר) the human (Adam, הָאָדָם) of the dust of the ground (מִן־הָאֲדָמָה) and breathed into its nostrils the breath of life (נִשְׁמַת); and the human (הָאָדָם) became a living soul (נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה).

The Rabbis play on this word “yetzer” created/formed. And wonder **when does this powerful part of ourselves** – the *Yetzer HaRa* – **enter each person?**

This text from the Talmud is a discussion between a Roman emperor and R. Yehudah HaNasi – the rabbi who was known as the person who codified the Mishnah.

Talmud, Sanhedrin 91b

And **Antoninos** (a Roman emperor) said to **Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi**: **From when does the evil inclination (יֵצֶר רָע) dominate a person? Is it from the moment of the formation of the embryo or from the moment of emergence from the womb?** Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi said to him: It is **from the moment of the formation of the embryo**. Antoninos said to him: **If so**, the evil inclination would cause the fetus to **kick his mother's innards and emerge** from the womb. **Rather, the evil inclination dominates a person from the moment of emergence from the womb**. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi said: **Antoninos taught me this matter, and there is a verse that supports him, as it is stated: "Sin crouches at the entrance"** (Genesis 4:7), indicating that it is from the moment of birth, when the newborn emerges from the entrance of his mother's womb, that the evil inclination lurks.

OK – so now we know that this powerful force – *Yetzer HaRa* – enters our being right at the moment of birth.

**But WHY is it there? What's its PURPOSE...**

Midrash, Bereshit Rabbah 9:7<sup>1</sup>

(7) **Rabbi Nahman said in Rabbi Samuel's name: 'Behold, it was good' refers to the Good Desire; 'And behold, it was very good' refers to the Evil Desire (יֵצֶר רָע).** (It only says, 'very good' after man was created with both the good and bad

---

<sup>1</sup> *Bereshit Rabbi* is Rabbinic midrash written in Babylonia, around 500 CE., around the time of the codification of the Talmud. It is midrash on the Book of Genesis. Written in Hebrew mixed with Aramaic and occasional Greek words.

inclinations, in all other cases it only says 'and God saw that it was good') **Can then the Evil Desire be very good? That would be extraordinary! But without the Evil Desire, however, no man would build a house, take a wife and beget children;** and thus said King Solomon: 'I have also noted that all labor and skillful enterprise come from men's envy of each other...' (Ecclesiastes 4:4)

This is a **RADICAL** text. On the one hand, this powerful/animal like force:

- a) Is actually called "Very good"
- b) Yet it doesn't listen to reason or ethics
- c) AND seems **necessary** for humanity to keep on living (ie - to build a house, get married and have children.)

### **What are we to do with it?**

Rabbis of the Talmud came up with a plan....

Like anything that is **overwhelming and out of control** – they **instinctively try and contain it....**

### Talmud, Yoma 69b<sup>2</sup>

The Gemara recounts an event described in the verse: "**And they cried with a loud voice to the Lord their God**" (Nehemiah 9:4). **What was said? Rav said, and some say it was Rabbi Yoḥanan who said: Woe, woe. It is this, i.e., the evil inclination (Yetzer HaRa), that destroyed the Temple, and burned its Sanctuary, and murdered all the righteous ones, and caused the Jewish people to be exiled from their land. And it still dances among us, i.e., it still affects us. Didn't You give it to us solely for the purpose of our receiving reward for overcoming it? We**

---

<sup>2</sup> Tractate Yoma from the Talmud was composed between about 450-550 CE in Babylonia. The word Yoma, "The Day," refers to Yom Kippur. Yoma consists of eight chapters; the first seven discuss the preparation for and service of the High Priest in the Temple on Yom Kippur day. The last chapter discusses the laws of fasting, other prohibitions of Yom Kippur, and the process of repentance.

**do not want it, and we do not want its reward.** We are prepared to forgo the potential rewards for overcoming the evil inclination as long as it departs from us....

In response to the indication of divine acceptance (God stated that God's seal is "Truth," and sent a message down to earth warning people of this message), **they observed a fast for three days and three nights, and God delivered the evil inclination to them. The form of a fiery lion cub (גִּוְרִיָּא דְּנוֹרָא)** came forth from the chamber of the Holy of Holies....

**When they caught hold of it** (the Yetzer HaRa) **one of its hairs fell, and it let out a shriek of pain that was heard for four hundred parasangs<sup>3</sup>. They said: What should we do to kill it? Perhaps, Heaven forbid, they will have mercy upon him from Heaven,** since it cries out so much. **The prophet (Zechariah) said to them: Throw it into a container made of lead and seal the opening with lead,** since lead absorbs sound. **As it is stated: "And he said: This is the evil one. And he cast it down into the midst of the measure, and he cast a stone of lead upon its opening"** (Zechariah 5:8). They followed this advice and were freed of the evil inclination.

When they saw that the evil inclination was delivered into their hands as they requested, the Sages **said: Since it is an auspicious time, let us pray also concerning the evil inclination for sin. They prayed, and it was also delivered into their hands.**

Zechariah the prophet **said to them: See and understand that if you kill this evil inclination the world will be destroyed** because as a result there will also no longer be any desire to procreate. They followed his warning, and instead of killing the evil inclination **they imprisoned it for three days. At that time, people searched for a fresh egg throughout all of Eretz Yisrael and could not find one.** Since the inclination to reproduce was quashed, the chickens stopped laying eggs. **They said: What should we do? If we kill it, the world will be destroyed. If we pray for half, i.e., that only half its power be annulled, nothing will be achieved**

---

<sup>3</sup> A "parasang" is a historical Iranian unit of walking distance, the length of which varied according to terrain and speed of travel. The European equivalent is the league. In modern terms the distance is about 3 or 3½ miles.

because **Heaven does not grant half** gifts, only whole gifts. What did they do? **They gouged out its eyes, effectively limiting its power, and set it free. And this was effective** to the extent **that a person is no longer aroused with his close relatives.**

I wonder – how often we try to:

**lock up and suppress** our *Yetzer HaRa*?

We think we can get away with “fooling it” by **numbing** ourselves with **substances** or **running away with our distractions.**

Or perhaps - just as harmful – **we pretend** that our *Yetzer HaRa* **is under control** or **of no consequence?**

Then when we’re not looking it rears its **uncontrollable head.**

Think about our world now:

Consider the anger, loneliness & alienation between people.

Think about the wars raging around the world, judgmental attitudes, and our earth’s decline.

**When we deny the power of our *Yetzer HaRa*,** all we’re doing is hiding from ourselves.

What are we to do?... Locking it up doesn’t work. Denial is counterproductive.

The rabbis come up with a radical suggestion:

Talmud, Berachot 54a

**One is obligated to recite a blessing for the bad** that befalls him **just as he recites a blessing for the good** that befalls him, **as it is stated: “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart**, with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:5). The mishna explains this verse as follows: **“With all your heart (בְּכָל לִבְבְּךָ)”** means **with your two inclinations, with your good inclination (Yetzer HaTov) and your evil inclination (Yetzer HaRa).**

**Can you imagine offering a blessing** for your *Yetzer HaRa*? What aspect of your Yetzer HaRa would you want to offer a **blessing** for?...

Would it be your tendency to:

- escape with substances, with food, sex, work, or with pouring yourself into your kids?
- or would it be your challenging character traits like your impatience, judgmental attitude or egocentrism?

Fill in YOUR blank....

And then – IMAGINE (doing what this text is suggesting):

holding it tenderly, without judgment, **and giving it a blessing...**

**What would you say to it?**

**What would you want it to hear?**

Remember, our *Yetzer HaTov* and *Yetzer HaRa* were **both** formed at creation.

This next text is also **SO emotionally astute.**

It challenges us to think of them (the *Tov v'Ra*) as **one and the same...**

Bereshit Rabbah 9:9

Rabbi Ze'ira said: "behold it was very good" (Genesis 1:31) this is the Garden of Eden. "AND behold it was very good" this is *Gehinom* (Hell). **And is *Gehinom* very good?** Impossible! An allegory: a king had an orchard and put within it workers, and built a treasure-house at its entrance, and said: 'whoever works him/herself appropriately with the work of the orchard can come into the treasure-house, and whoever did not, cannot. **So too, whoever accustoms him/herself with *mitzvot* and good deeds, behold this is the Garden of Eden; and whoever does not, behold this is *Gehinom*.**

One reading of this is that **THE SAME PLACE** – the same Garden – or read - **our same qualities** - our same Animal-Like DRIVES – **can be used for good** (which will bring us to the Garden of Eden) **or can be used for destruction** (and that will bring us to *Gehinom*/Hell)

**It's up to us. Same drive – different outcomes.**

So true!

How many times have you been **told** that **a strength of yours - is ALSO a weakness?**

A GIFT that you have - can be **interpreted** as **helpful or harmful.**

A RELATIONSHIP you have - can be **pursued for holiness** or it **can cross a boundary.**

I'm curious to hear how these texts landed for you...



Let's take about 5-7 minutes to engage in some *chavruta* learning – with a partner.

You may choose someone you know, or turn to someone you don't know.

Ideally, **just one other person**. In pairs of 2.

Bring an open mind and heart to your sharing.

Feel free to **use the 3 questions** I have at the bottom of the page.

**Or anything that rises for you** based on the many texts we covered.

We'll come back together in about 7 minutes.

### **Share:**

1. The Yetzar HaRa is necessary to sustain humanity. How does your **Yetzer HaRa help you in life?** Help you do/not do what?
2. We are told to **offer blessings** for our Yetzer HaTov (“good inclination”) and our Yetzer HaRa (“evil inclination”). What blessing would you want for your Yetzer HaRa?
3. How can the **same place** (as in the parable of the king's garden) be both a place of bliss and a place of hell? Share a relationship, pattern, or habit that is **both a “place’ of blessing for you and a challenge that trips you up.**

### **Welcome back...**

I'm not sure if I feel **relieved now that our Yetzer HaRa is out there running wild** in this room... or if **I'm scared** – a bit of both!

I'd like to end with one more surprising text from the Talmud:

Talmud, Sota 47a

It is taught in a *baraita* that **Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar says:** With regard to the evil inclination AND to a child... the left hand (weaker hand) should reject, and the right hand should welcome. If one pushes too forcefully, the damage might be irreversible.

**This seems counter intuitive!**

One would THINK that the Rabbis would want us to use our RIGHT – dominant hand – to FORCEFULLY **push away** our *Yetzer HaRa*.

But NO!

Only our *left* – *WEAKER hand* – is what we're asked to use to **push away** our *Yetzer HaRa*.

And with our RIGHT hand – we're told to **WELCOME these wild animal-like forces** to **sit next to us**.

Welcome *Yetzer HaRa* !

For the next 9 days we're going to dance with you

as we **go deep**.

get **honest**.

and **get real**.

Stay tuned for Yom Kippur Morning.

When I'll share more about why and how to **sit with our *Yetzer HaRa***.