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Temple Israel of Hollywood

### Balancing our *Yetzer HaRa* on our Shoulders

In 1974, Naples, **Italy**, the Serbian born artist Marina Abramović featured herself in a **six-hour work of performance art**.<sup>1</sup>

The work involved Abramović standing still while the audience was invited to **engage with her in any way**.

There wasn't a stage.

She and the visitors stood in the same space, making it clear that the **audience was part of the art**.

At the beginning, some visitors were **gentle**. Offering her a **rose** or a **kiss**.

But soon participants in the room began to, let's just say, **behave rather badly** toward her...

Eventually a **fight broke** out between audience factions.

After exactly 6 hours, as planned, she **began to move** and started **walking toward the audience**. And what happened?

**Everyone ran away.**

Today is Yom Kippur, a day of deep personal and communal introspection. We turn an **uncomfortable lens** on our **behaviors to return to our best and most empowered selves**.

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<sup>1</sup> I first read about this performance art piece called **Rhythm 0** in *Easy Beauty: A Memoir* by Chloe Cooper Jones, p. 113. In it she laid 72 objects on the table and allowed any visitor to use them in whatever way they wanted. She took full responsibility for whatever consequences would happen to her. She was 28 years old at the time.

To live in a **clearer** relationship with each other, the earth, and with that **Creative Power we call God**.

The shocking story of Marina Abramović's performance piece taught me a number of lessons about the **challenges of being human** in an **unsafe world**.

It reminded me that **everyone in the room that day...**

the **artist** and ALL the "**visitors**"

were **varied aspects of a single person**:

- The kind loving people,
- the vulnerable one,
- the assaulting ones,
- the conflicted ones....

They were all **parts of OURSELVES**.

**We're complicated, layered people**

and life is **constantly challenging** us.

At times it feels dangerous to be human<sup>2</sup> - like we're stumbling around a dark room looking for the light switch, or **just in need of relief**.

Sometimes what **comes at us** is **kind and loving**, and sometimes not so much.

Sometimes **we're** kind and loving, and sometimes not so much.

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<sup>2</sup> The late anthropologist Ashley Montague says that "Everything we come **to be**, to **know**, and to **do** as human beings **we ... learn from other human beings**... And that's why **to be human is to be in danger** (because) we can **easily be taught many wrong and unsound things**."<sup>2</sup> *On Our Best Behavior: The Seven Deadly Sins and the Price Women Pay to Be Good* by Elise Lohnen, Intro, p. xv

We have **complex personalities**, and we live in a **trying world** – surrounded by **fast-paced, high-speed everything**.

**High speed wars, news and emails.**

**High speed COVID variants, climate change and Instagram posts.**

When we're **agitated or lonely, or threatened...** or -- well you fill in the blank – it can be easy to **succumb to questionable behavior**.

Like some of the visitors in the Italian art gallery, **it's not always our best selves that show up**.

On Yom Kippur – instead of watching a performance artist – **we're watching ourselves** and if we're honest, **it's painful**.

Marina Abramović hoped we'd see - how sometimes our **worst selves, not our best selves**, make an appearance.

Like the “audience members” – when we're confronted with our worst impulses, **we want to run away**.

Actually, **we've wanted to run away** since the beginning of time.

Remember the Garden of Eden? After the first humans ate what they were told not to eat, they **hid themselves** from God.<sup>3</sup>

And God asked the very first question in the Torah:

*Ayekah*<sup>4</sup> - Where are you?!

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 3:8

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 3:9

Not, where are you physically – but **where are you in your life?** What are you **trying get away with?** **Who** do you think you're **fooling?**

Don't you ask yourselves this question from time to time?

**Where are you in your life?**

What are you **trying to get away with?**

What part of **yourself are you running away** from?

The 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish theologian Martin Buber says it beautifully:

**Every person hides, because every person is Adam... Every person (builds) a network of hiding places in order to **escape taking responsibility for life lived... day to day ... (We live) from one hiding place to the next,** (and then our life) **becomes more and more untenable....** (and all we're doing is) **hiding from ourselves....**<sup>5</sup>**

No fun!

You might think – “Take off our veils! Stop hiding!”

Sound's great – but our coverings are **so heavy** – at times as **thick as walls.**

The poet Mary Oliver captured our **hiding** well when she wrote:

“Oh the **house of denial** has **thick walls**

and **very small windows**

and whoever lives there, little by little,

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<sup>5</sup> *The Way of Humanity* by Martin Buber, translated by Mehlman and Padawer, p. 5

will turn into **stone**.”<sup>6</sup>

Please – we don’t want to turn into stone.

Yet our walls are so thick.

**We hide behind walls** made of

shopping, food, sex,

drink, drugs, screens,

exercise, work, or loosing ourselves in our children –

you name your method –

it can be challenging to even see out our windows.

And what fuels our hiding **even more** is our **culture** of **never - having -enough**.

When is my **house** enough? My **paycheck** enough? My **marriage** enough?

When is my **body** enough? My **food intake** enough?

When do I have enough **good friends**? When have my **kids** “succeeded enough”?

And when will I ever slow down and stop asking when enough is enough?!

And because we’re never satisfied, we’re also perpetually **uncomfortable being in the present**.

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<sup>6</sup> *A Thousand Mornings: Poems by Mary Oliver*, excerpt from “Hum Hum”, p. 42

- How often do we **take photos** to show others **sometime** in the future what we're doing right now?
- Wonder why the song "Tomorrow" from Annie was such a hit? What about today?

This past April I traveled by myself for a week in Israel. I tried something new – I didn't bring a book. I didn't bring my air pods. I stopped reaching for my iphone.

I just sat.

Meal after meal.

Walk after walk.

BY MYSELF.

I sunk into the **discomfort of empty space**, of not being productive.

You see – I've **also** learned to **hide from myself** - in my busy productivity.

It was totally against my nature. Yet, what I discovered was invaluable.

I began to **quiet my flooded mind** and reflect on my life.

*Ayeka?*

I heard an inner God-voice call to me.

Where are you?...

OK – So we hide from ourselves, we live in a "never enough" world – you get it.

**Is there a way out?**

Rabbi Baer of Radoshitz asked his teacher the Seer of Lublin “**Show me the way to serve God.**”

The tzaddik answered, “There’s **no one way**. God can be served through study, prayer, or fasting, even by eating. **Every person should listen to the way their heart is drawn** – (and) follow **that** chosen way.”<sup>7</sup>

Buber interprets this to mean that “God doesn’t say ‘This is the way to Me but that other is not.’ God **does** say, ‘Whatever you do **CAN** be a Way to Me, **provided that Way leads to Me**’.”<sup>8</sup>

But **how do we know if a path leads to God?** – and if you bristle at the word God, just fill in the blank – a path that leads you to holiness, or being the best-person-you-can-be...

That’s what we’re here to ask ourselves today: **What path can lead to my being the best person I can be? Where do I start?**

**This is where the hard work comes in...** Jewish tradition has some guidance for us. It’s called “**wrestling with our *Yetzer HaRa***.” This is sometimes translated “wrestling with our ‘evil inclination’” – but that’s too simple.

What Jewish tradition calls the *Yetzer HaRa* is really an **awesome quality** we each have:

**our creativity,**

**our passion,**

**our libido,**

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<sup>7</sup> *The Way of Humanity* by Martin Buber, translated by Mehlman and Padawer, p. 9

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 11

and our “animal energy.”<sup>9</sup>

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of Rosh HaShannah<sup>10</sup>, I taught about the **power of the Yetzer HaRa**. According to rabbinic tradition<sup>11</sup> our *Yetzer HaRa* is not something to be ashamed of. In fact, the rabbis go as far as to say that it’s the **life force that sustains the world**.

The rabbis of the Talmud tell a story<sup>12</sup> that one day they were so **frustrated by this wild and uncontrollable part of ourselves**, that they bargained with God and were able to **capture the Yetzer HaRa and seal it in a lead box**. Then after 3 days they looked around and noticed that the **world was dying – not one house was built, not one person got married, not one egg was born**. So, they made “peace” with the *Yetzer HaRa* and agreed to let it go free.... But only after gorging its eyes out – apparently to limit its power.<sup>13</sup>

On the one hand this story is a **rabbi’s fantasy**: Lock up our **uncontrollable impulses**, and move on!

And yet, they know it’s **impossible – and unsustainable**. That’s why they tell the story!

Rav Joseph Soloveitchik, one of the leading Modern Orthodox rabbis of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, makes a psychologically **daring assertion** about the importance of welcoming the *Yetzer HaRa* energy into our lives. He teaches that **WHEN WE**

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<sup>9</sup> I have gratitude to Rabbi Marcia Prager for her edits to this sermon, and also her creative definition of Yetzer HaRa in this section.

<sup>10</sup> See my teaching titled “A Holy Force That Takes Hold of Us – *Yeter HaRa*”, 2<sup>nd</sup> day Rosh HaShannah, 2023/5784

<sup>11</sup> Good inclination is called “Yetzer HaTov” and evil inclination is called “Yetzer HaRa”.

<sup>12</sup> Talmud, Yoma 69b

<sup>13</sup> The gorging out the eyes of the Yetzer HaRa (which in this Aggadah appeared in the form of a cub) was to curb its power. Buber recognizes that “our strongest longing... (our) consuming passion(s) – or “the evil inclination” ... seek to tempt us... (and the way we can harness it’s power and turn it into a holy energy) depends entirely on our ability to direct the strength of that very longing... away from the random toward the necessary. (*Way of Humanity*, p. 12)



**WRESTLE with our *Yetzer HaRa* and channel its energy** toward something positive, productive, or beneficial – THAT is the **definition** of **HOLINESS**.

He teaches: “**Holiness is not won easily**, at no sacrifice. **It emerges out of sorrow, confusion, and inner turmoil.**”<sup>14</sup>

In other words, holiness isn't some highfalutin image of angels floating in the air with Beethoven's “Ode to Joy” playing in the background – **instead HOLINESS is harnessing this animal energy we all have – and channeling it toward something constructive.**

A radical suggestion: Can we **invite** the *Yetzer HaRa* to **sit on our shoulders**, to feel its energy. And then to ask - without judgment:

**Why are you here?** and

**How are you serving me?**<sup>15</sup>

We want to use your energy to do GOOD and not harm.

Every time **you, *Yetzer HaRa*, try to take hold of us**, instead of messing up and doing things we'll later regret, we want to **FEEL that energy and redirect it**.

Perhaps we can each take a moment – right now – and hold one person, one relationship, one harmful cycle you're struggling with in your life.

**Instead of feeling badly about it, instead of shaming yourself**, imagine embracing it and asking:

●What would it take to channel this force and **turn it into holy energy?**

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<sup>14</sup> *Family Redeemed: Essays on Family Relationships*, ed. Shatz and Wolowelsky, 2000, p. 74

<sup>15</sup> A radical text in the Talmud even suggested we should bless our *Yetzer HaRa* (Talmud, Berachot 54a) and another teaching says that we should welcome it with our right hand (Talmud, Sota 47a)

Yes, we all have **demons**.

The Greek word for demon, “*daimon*” just means “life energy that doesn’t obey the rules”<sup>16</sup> or a “divider.”<sup>17</sup> Our **demons divide** and **distract us**. They separate us from the Source of Life and who we want to be.

But HOW we struggle with our demons is what we’re doing today.<sup>18</sup>

Today’s **liturgy calls out: don’t run away**. Don’t try and lock up your *Yetzer HaRa* in a lead box.

Instead with humility **hold your Yetzer HaRa gently and say: “Al chet shechatanu lifanachea** – For the way we’ve missed the mark by....

And then fill in YOUR blank....

I know! **Balancing our Yetzer HaRa energy on our shoulders** is challenging.

And..... IT - IS - possible.

**It’s possible ---- if we become heretics.**

OK, that might seem shocking. But “heretic” is another misunderstood word.

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<sup>16</sup> *On Our Best Behavior: The Seven Deadly Sins and the Price Women Pay to Be Good*, Elise Lohnen, p. 11

<sup>17</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daimon>

<sup>18</sup> A Greek monk, Evagrius Ponticus (345-99 CA), fell in love with a married woman and exiled himself to a monastery in the Egyptian desert to supposedly “battle his demons”. He thought he could run to the desert, to focus on his prayer, and avoid distraction. But that’s not the Jewish way. (*On Our Best Behavior: The Seven Deadly Sins and the Price Women Pay to Be Good*, Elise Lohnen, p. 11)

Heretic literally only means “a person who chooses.”<sup>19</sup>

I can choose to hold this **wild energy** AND use it for **HOLINESS!**

## How?

Here are in **5 Jewish tools** I find helpful:

- Patience
- Truth telling
- Commitment
- Gratitude
- and A Friendship of Accountability

## Here me out fellow heretics!!!

**Tool #1 - Patience** -The Hebrew for patience is *savlanut*, from the Hebrew word *sevel*, to suffer. When we hold patience, **we sit in a gray area**. We allow space to discern what’s troubling us.

As Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz teaches: “We’re not suffering in our patience, (in as much as) our patience enables us **to more deeply see another’s suffering**,”<sup>20</sup> – or to **hold** our own suffering, and not run away.

- Patience helps us sit with our *Yeter HaRa*.

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<sup>19</sup>[https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/heretic#:~:text=%2C%20heretick%20\(obsolete\)-,Etymology,%2C%20%E2%80%9C%20choose%E2%80%9D](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/heretic#:~:text=%2C%20heretick%20(obsolete)-,Etymology,%2C%20%E2%80%9C%20choose%E2%80%9D).

<sup>20</sup> *Pearls of Jewish Wisdom on Living with Kindness*, Shmuly Yanklowitz, p. 131

**Tool #2 - Truth telling** – The Hebrew for “truth” is *Emet*. According to tradition, “God’s seal is Truth.”<sup>21</sup>

So how can we pursue “Truth” when that’s God’s territory? Soloveitchik teaches that every person has an **“inner man” who no one knows**. (But the problem is) he hardly knows himself. Which is why the psalms read: **“All men are liars.”**<sup>22</sup> “Not because (we) WANT to tell the **UNtruth**. (We’re) **simply UNABLE** to tell the **truth**.” He also admits that “Every (person) has a **secret which** (no one) **will ever betray**.”<sup>23</sup>

I’m not suggesting that we’re off the hook for truth telling. But what I think Soloveitchik IS saying, is that **though** our goal is **to be more honest**, it’s OK to be gentle on ourselves and accept that **we all have secrets**, or emotional limitations, **and maybe that’s OK... for now**.

● Truth Telling allows us to look at our *Yetzer HaRa* in the mirror.

**Tool #3 - Commitment** – In Hebrew, *brit*. Once again Soloveitchik vulnerably writes that **“Eros knows no repetition... It excites in the new.”** Using the example of an alienated marriage - but you can fill in any primary relationship gone awry - he teaches that **“to confine the essence of marriage to love would be tantamount to building a magnificent edifice on quicksand.”** So, when we commit, we give a gift to those we deeply care about.<sup>24</sup>

**After 25 years of being married to my beloved Bruce**, I know how important love is. I’m not suggesting that anyone settle for a loveless relationship. What I **am** saying is that any relationship worth a dollar, takes work. And sometimes they’re in such a bad place, that all we can do is lean on our *brit*, our commitment to one another.

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<sup>21</sup> Talmud, Shabbat 55a and Yoma 69b

<sup>22</sup> Psalms 116:11

<sup>23</sup> *Family Redeemed: Essays on Family Relationships*, ed. Shatz and Wolowelsky, 2000, p. 21

<sup>24</sup> *Family Redeemed: Essays on Family Relationships*, ed. Shatz and Wolowelsky, 2000, p. 36 & 41

- Commitment helps us not flee with our *Yetzer HaRa*.

#### Tool #4 – Gratitude – In Hebrew, *Hoda'ah*.

According to tradition, in the time to come “**All prayers will cease, except for prayers of thanksgiving.**”<sup>25</sup>

Why in the messianic future will we still offer prayers of praise? Does *Elohim* need our thanks? I doubt it. Maybe it’s because every time we express gratitude, we’re **putting ourselves** in the “MODE” of “living in a messianic world” – so to speak.

- Gratitude helps us **see beyond our dissatisfaction, redirecting our *Yetzer HaRa*.**<sup>26</sup>

#### Tool #5 – A Friendship of Accountability<sup>27</sup>

When the U.S. Surgeon General sounds an alarm on the deadly threat of loneliness,<sup>28</sup> we know that **deep connection** is a treasure.

The Aramaic word for friendship, *chavruta*, means more than just a friendship; it’s the primary model of Jewish learning. A *chevruta*, in its truest sense, is a **challenger** (*bar plugta*), **not merely one who supports us, but also challenges us.**<sup>29</sup>

- A friendship of accountability challenges our *Yetzer HaRa* so we make **thoughtful choices.**

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<sup>25</sup> Leviticus Rabbah 9:7

<sup>26</sup> See my 2022 Yom Kippur sermon titled “Thorns of Disappointment”

<sup>27</sup> Dr. Martin Luther King Jr famously asked: Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, what are you doing for others? (*Pearls of Jewish Wisdom on Living with Kindness*, Shmuly Yanklowitz, p. 144)

<sup>28</sup> “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation” by Dr. Vivek H. Murthy, 2023

(<https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>)

<sup>29</sup> *Pearls of Jewish Wisdom on Living with Kindness*, Shmuly Yanklowitz, p. 144 & 145 (Note Soloveitchik explores two types of friendship: one in which two people **confide in one another** in times of crises and in times of deep joy. And another where **two people have absolute trust and faith in one another.** *Pearls of Jewish Wisdom on Living with Kindness*, Shmuly Yanklowitz, p. 145 (Note: Soloveitchik calls these two friendships “*haver li-de’agah*” and “*haver le’dei’ah*”)

If we're honest, **each of us** battles with our *Yetzer HaRa*. We have the tools of

- Patience
- Truth telling
- Commitment
- Gratitude
- and Friendships of Accountability

at our disposal.

None of this is easy.

And here's the final clincher:

Reb Nachman of Bratzlov teaches that each time **a person climbs a rung on the holiness ladder**, each time we THINK we've got this down – that we've harnessed the energies of our *Yetzer haRa* toward holiness - a **new Yetzer Ha'ra is created JUST FOR THAT RUNG!**<sup>30</sup>

Oy! Sounds like an impossible mission.

Maybe that's why we're here year after year!

Revisiting our "personal Italian art galleries" –

but instead of running away – we're **CHOOSING TO BE HERITICS!**

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<sup>30</sup> <https://www.alephcanada.ca/reb-daniel-writings/2023/8/23/who-creates-all-things>. Elsewhere Reb Nachman teaches that: in the time to come we will give the yetzer hara a new name. Rather than calling him the evil inclination, we should call him, "koach hamedameh", the power of imagination. (<https://breslov.org/your-imagination-your-evil-inclination/>)

**Choosing to** step up the **next rung of our ladder,**  
situated at the base of **each of our feet,**  
with our ***Yetzer HaRa*** **balanced on our shoulder**  
peering out our ever-expanding **window.**