

## Combating the Yestzer HaRah

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When I was in 5th grade, I screwed up. My family had gone on vacation for a couple days and I forgot about an exam that would take place when I returned. When I first realized it, I got a little arrogant and thought that I would be fine. Instead for the first and only time in my life I failed an exam, and for that term I received a D. I was livid and embarrassed, never having received a failing grade before. I was angry with the teacher for not considering other term work but instead basing my grade only on this particular unit. I was upset with myself for being lazy and arrogant. In the 20 years that have followed, I have never since received a D. I neglected to tell you that I went to a Jewish day school and the subject of the exam was prayer. I sometimes wonder if this experience isn't what set me on my Rabbinic path I thought about that humiliating moment this week as I read about the Israelites and their humiliating experience.

This week we read of the Israelites straying from their path. Moses momentarily steps away from the people to have a little conversation with God. Meanwhile the people get anxious without their fearless leader. The Israelites gather against Aaron the high priest, demanding: "Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt-we do not know what has happened to him." Before you know it the people have donated their gold jewelry to create a molten calf to worship. (PAUSE)

Did anyone here make it to the musical Alterboyz at the Wadsworth Theater recently? Just like every good Student Rabbi should do, last month I attended this show that tells the story of 4 churchgoers and a nice Jewish boy who long to redeem the world of its sins with their pop rock boy-band comparable to the Backstreet Boys and N'Sync.

Yearning to combat the devil, the boys chant:

He came into your life like a whisper.  
He took control of you in the dark of the night  
He singses you with every glance  
He has you, heart, soul, his hold is so tight.  
He makes you do things you don't want to.  
He commands and you obey.  
Take my hand we'll stare him down.  
We'll show you what to say;

Not exactly my theology, but this amusing song does bring to light the challenges that we face everyday when deciding how to act. Why do we do the crazy things that we do, even when we often

know better?

Looking to the Israelites: what exactly is going through their minds? Did they forget Moses's order to wait for him patiently? Had they already overlooked the fact that God had heard their cries and redeemed them from slavery? Did they not remember that they were expected to look to one God, putting aside the idolatrous practices all around them?

Our tradition speaks of two impulses, in Hebrew: yetzers-the good impulse, ha'yetzer ha'tov and the bad impulse, ha'yetzer ha'rah. Sometimes our tradition even paints the picture of a tug of war with an angel on one shoulder whispering in one ear and the devil whispering in the other, though in all honesty there are various Jewish outlooks on the topic.

One midrashic tale speaks of the bad yetzer being 13 years older than the good yetzer. From conception, the bad yetzer grows and travels with all maturing children, until age 13 when the good yetzer is born. At this transition point, the child begins to use Torah as a guide, counteracting the harsher ways of the bad yetzer.

Another midrash compares the bad yetzer to an iron that is placed in a flame. While in the fire, this heavy coarse material can be carefully and thoughtfully molded into various utensils. The words of Torah can be compared to this flame. The Torah yearns to shape the difficult bad yetzer that often resists modification. In this teaching the bad yetzer resists all attempts at change while in its natural state, but immersed in the flames of Torah its tendencies and energies become useful, transforming its resting nature.

What do these midrashim seem to suggest? Firstly, they imply that there is a dualistic feature of competing good and bad forces within the self. Humanity is pulled in various directions, susceptible to taking any number of paths, even those paths that may not be ideal choices. Secondly, our attraction to trouble seems to be somewhat natural, but the possibility of transformation is also present. It may be tough to resist that which is seemingly wrong but holds potential relief and benefit. Thirdly, Torah is offered as a means to transform the yetzer ha'rah. In the face of hard choices, the values of Torah can serve as a guide, helping us to live lives of faith, trust, compassion and community.

Returning to this week's Torah portion, there's a lot of yetzer ha'rah going on here. This discussion offers some unique insight for us to keep in mind as we yearn to counter act our darker side. An angry God longs to destroy the Israelite population after their great transgression. Moses appeases God, convincing God to hold back the anger. But even Moses can't hold back his rage as he returns from Mount Sinai to see the people dancing around their golden calf. He throws the two tablets containing the 10 commandments on the ground, shattering them to pieces. He would later melt the calf and carefully instruct the people as to how they strayed. Quite significantly he then returns to the top of

Mount Sinai and collects a second set of Tablets.

What does this passage teach? For one, it illustrates how easy it is to transgress. It may seem obvious to us that the Israelites should have known better, but at this early stage as a people, it is tough for us to imagine what it would have been like. Afraid and vulnerable, the people followed a dangerous path in search of safety and comfort. This text teaches us that inevitably we all make mistakes as individuals and as a people. Some of these mistakes are apparent and obvious; others are more subtle and difficult. One of the truly remarkable things about our mishaps is that we can potentially transform them into learning experiences, guiding our future paths in different ways. Our Torah portion this week acknowledges that we can really mess up, but even when we have totally erred we will often have a second chance to right our wrong. We may be susceptible to our bad yetzer at first, but our good yetzer is there to catch us when we fall, transforming our negative experiences into moments of learning and reflection. In the battle of the yetzers, the good CAN win out!

Purim has now passed and we can prepare for Passover. For another random bad yetzer piece of info; the Rabbis see yeast not only in bread, but in ourselves, as represented by our puffed egos, greed and lust. As we approach Passover, this is the season to clean our homes as well as ourselves. There's a Kabbalistic tradition to save 10 pieces of hametz and to hide them around the house before Passover. With a candle in hand, it is then customary to search these pieces out before the holiday begins. As we search out these last remaining pieces of hametz we can reflect on 10 places in our lives where our bad yetzer got the best of us. As we burn these pieces of hametz, we can re-center ourselves on the months ahead.

Each day we are faced with hundreds of choices. Some are clear-cut, while other choices are more complicated. With each situation we are often pulled in two directions needing to weigh right versus wrong, or perhaps right versus more right or wrong versus more wrong. As we travel this path of dilemmas, may we remember the experiences that we've built on that guide our way. Let us revel in our second chances, transforming our initial errors. May we cherish the lessons learned, refocusing mistakes into growth opportunities and letting our good yetzer shine.