The Evil Inclination

Background

Everyone has a Good Inclination (yetzer ha-tov) and an Evil Inclination (yetzer ha-ra).

-Evil Inclination: Incites to do the wrong things, do things to excess, insist on instant gratification, fall to temptation, demand from others without caring what happens to them

-Typical behavior of a child

Origin of term is in Torah:

Yetzer lev ha-adam ra' min'orav.
The inclination of a man's heart is evil from his youth. [Genesis 8:21; also 6:5].

The Talmud adds: "From his youth" means "from his birth". [Y Berachot 3:5]

The commentary Avot de Rabbi Natan adds:

It is said that the Evil Inclination is thirteen years older than the Good Inclination. It arrives when man is born and grows with him, so that he transgresses commandments, and there is nothing in his mind to chastise him. But when he is thirteen years old, the Good Inclination arrives. [Avot d'Rabbi Natan 16:12]

The Tosafot elaborate:

The Good Inclination is given to a person in his mother's womb, where he knows the entire Torah. And at the time of birth, the Evil Inclination enters and banishes the Good Inclination until the person matures, and the Good Inclination enters [once again]. [Piskei Tosafot to Nedarim 62]

So the Good Inclination is a sign of maturity, of transition from childhood to adulthood.

The Talmud also finds an allusion in the Creation:

Rav Nahman ben Rav Hisda expounded: What is meant by the text, “Then the Lord God formed man?” [Gen. 2:7] [The word for “formed”, va-yitzer] is written with two yods [when one would have been enough], to show that God created [man with] two inclinations, one good and the other evil. [Berachot 61a]

Commentators never mention destroying the Evil Inclination: It is here to stay. We can only subdue it, not get rid of it.
But we CAN dominate it, decline to succumb to it, and not fall into temptation. It CAN be done. God said in the Torah:

I have set before you this day life and good, and death and evil. [I have given you a choice.] [Deut. 30:15]

Relevant quotes

Obviously, rabbis always thundered against the Evil Inclination and had a lot to say about it:

-212 returns in Sources (Soncino CD) for “Evil Inclination”, only 31 for “Good Inclination”.
-108,000 returns for “Evil Inclination” in Google, only 24,400 for “Good Inclination”.

In Pirkei Avot, Ben Zoma says:

Who is mighty? He who subdues his [Evil] Inclination. [Avot 4:1]

And Rabbi El’azar HaKappar says:

Do not let your [Evil] Inclination convince you that the grave is a refuge for you. [Avot 4:29]

The Midrash says:

For if anyone makes a stand and subdues and dominates his Evil Inclination, like Moses in his time, David in his time, or Ezra in his time, his whole generation depends on him. [Song of Songs Rabbah 4:7]

Elsewhere, the Midrash also says:

[It says] “For the commandmentis a lamp, and the teaching is light.” (Prov. 6:23). Why is the teaching called “light”? Because it often happens that when one is eager to fulfil a commandment, the Evil Inclination within him dissuades him, saying: “Why do you want to perform this commandment and diminish your wealth? Instead of giving away to others, give to your own children.”

But the Good Inclination says to him: Give rather to a pious cause… “For the commandment is a lamp”. Just as the light of the lamp is undiminished even if a million… candles are kindled from it, so will he who gives towards the fulfilment of any commandment not suffer any decrease in his possessions. [Ex. Rabbah 36:3]

The Talmud says:

-Rabbi Shim'on ben Levi said: A man's Evil Inclination gains strength against him every day, and seeks to kill him… If it wasn't for the help of the Holy One, blessed be He, he would not be able to prevail against it. [Kiddushin 30b]
Rav Shmuel bar Nahmani, citing Rabbi Jochanan, stated, “The Evil Inclination entices man in this world, and then testifies against him in the World to Come.” [Sukkah 52b]

The Midrash even tells us that we complained to God about our free will and asked for it to be removed:

Israel complained: "If a potter leaves a pebble in the clay, and the jar leaks, is the potter not responsible? You have left the Evil Inclination in us. Remove it, and we will do Your will!"

God replied, "This I will do in the time to come. [i.e., in the afterlife.]

[Exodus Rabbah 46.4]

So after death we become perfect beings, like angels. Life becomes purely spiritual. It takes on a very different form.

Yet the Evil Inclination is a good thing!

Everything so far has been straightforward, black-and-white, linear…
   -and preachy!
   -and roughly similar to what many religions teach.

Now comes the unexpected Jewish twist: The Evil Inclination is a good thing!

The Torah says that everything God created was just "good" ("good" used 6 times: for light, earth and seas, plants, heavens, water and air creatures, and earth creatures). Then it adds:
   And God saw every thing that He had made, and, behold, it was very good (tov me-od). (Gen 1:31).

What was added at the end to make it "very good"? The Evil Inclination!

The Midrash says:
   Nachman said, in Rav Shmuel's name: "And, behold, it was very good" refers to the Evil Inclination. Can then the Evil Inclination be "very good"? That would be extraordinary! Yes, [because] without the Evil Inclination, no man would build a house, take a wife, beget a family, and engage in work.
   So said [King] Solomon [in Ecclesiastes]: "And I saw that all labor and all achievement in work was the result of man's envy and rivalry with his neighbor." (Eccl. 4:4) [Genesis Rabbah 9:7]

This suggests that we achieve things:
   -to show off, to gain the admiration of others,
   -to have more money,
   -to have more possessions,
-to “get the girl” (or the man),
-to do better than our neighbor, to be ahead of the competition,
-to win prizes,
-to exercise power,
  -Some say even sex is an act of violence, power and domination even under the best conditions
-to show those who said we would never amount to anything,
-to leave worthy deeds behind, so we are remembered after we die.

None of this is altruistic. Without these (base) incentives, we would not achieve anything -- no progress. They are essential for the continued existence of the world.

So the driving force behind our successes is bad impulses. So it is no surprise that the Talmud says:
   Abaye said: The greater the man, the greater his Evil Inclination. [Sukkah 52a]
Now we know why the great are great!

So we only need to control the Evil Inclination, not destroy it. A small amount of it is good. It is life’s driving force. In the Talmud, Rabbi Alexandri [says]:
   The Evil Inclination is like the leaven in the dough.
   [A little makes bread good, a lot destroys it.] [Berachot 17a]

Also, can't appreciate good without bad. Rabbi Aryeh Lieb Heller of Stry, an 18th-century Galician talmudist, said:
   In a life without struggle, the “good” will be weak.

**Why is Good Inclination alone not enough?**

It is possible to care too much to do any good.

Ex 1: In *Star Trek* episode, Captain Kirk splits into an Evil Kirk and a Good Kirk. The latter has so much compassion and empathy that it leads him to paralysis.
   -He sees that no matter what he does, some people might get hurt.
Ex 2: Surgeon operating on loved one: Eyes full of tears, hands shaking, mind full of dark thoughts, anxiety. So bad idea, because he cares too much. Must care a lot less to be effective.
  -But not not care at all, so want to be a doctor.

What to do?

Turn evil impulses into good
  -Example: If have a lust for blood, become surgeon or butcher.

The Talmud says:
  -Rav Nahman was once told by [his wife] Yaltha: “Observe, for everything that the Divine Law has forbidden us it has permitted us an equivalent.” [Chullin 109b]

[Why does the Torah say:] You shall love the Lord your God with ALL your heart? [Deut. 6:5]. With ALL your heart means with both your inclinations, the Evil Inclination as well as the Good Inclination. [Berachot 54a]

The Talmud adds that God may have created the Evil Inclination, but He also created its antidote, the Torah:
  -The Holy One, blessed be He, spoke to Israel: My children!
  -I created the Evil Inclination, but I [also] created the Torah, as its antidote.
  -If you occupy yourselves with the Torah, you will **not** be delivered into its hand…
  -But if you do not occupy yourselves with the Torah, you **will** be delivered into its hand…
  -If you will it, you can rule over it. [Kiddushin 30b]

Given the above, why don’t the Sources TELL people to follow the Evil Inclination occasionally?
  -Because the result would be a stampede! Exhort people NOT to follow it, and hopefully they will follow it just enough to be “good”!

Conclusion

Hillel best summed up the needed balance between the two opposing urges, when he said, in the Talmud:

*Im en ani li mi li? Uchshe-ani le-atsmi ma ani?*
  -If I am not for myself, who will be for me? [Evil]
  -And if I am for myself alone, what am I? [Good] [Avot 1:14]

May we all find the proper balance in our lives.