

I have been thinking a lot about passions unhinged. Moments when the id takes over.

I could say a lot about what I think of this election cycle but I am a rabbi and don't think my commentary on politics will take you any further than you are now.

What I can teach about is about the yetzer ha ra- the evil inclination. You see our tradition teaches that we are born with both the yetzer hatov (the good inclination) and the yetzer hara (the evil inclination). The goal of a human being is to live with the good and harness the evil. Not rid ourselves of it, but harness it.

What lives in the territory of the yetzer hara? Desire, anger, fear along with a few others. These are all essential emotions for living, but unchecked- they can create a lot of destruction.

Here's how the yetzer has appeared recently on a tv near you:

We are in danger. Our streets are not safe. We need a wall to keep bad people out and we need to close our borders to the dangers that loom in the world. It is dark out there.

There are places of danger, there is violence, it's real. But what is also real and dangerous is setting up a map key with symbols that you use to navigate the world that do not allow you to see human beings anymore. That do not allow the intricacies of people's stories, the complexity of living, and the bridge to get to someplace better.

When we look out at humanity and see a sea of people who can add richness and understanding to our experience and the experience of being alive, we open. We turn towards instead of gating ourselves up.

A few weeks ago, a beloved congregant passes by my office. Sees my door open and asks if we can talk. She has just been through a harrowing experience that she can't make sense of ...here it goes. She had recently taken over the custody of her nephew, bringing him and his sister into their family of four. Now 6 all together. He is in high school. The custody went through so quickly that she could not get him into the school she wanted him to attend. He began attending the local public school. Early one morning she gets a call from the charter school that if they come today and sign the paperwork, he can have a spot. They run over there, sign up and as they are exiting the charter school the police approach her

nephew. She asks if there is an issue and they ask why he is not in school. She went through the details but even with the information they chose to arrest her. They strip searched her, took her belongings and put her in a cell for over 10 hours. They took her nephew in a transit van to school.

“I told them” she said, “I am this boy’s guardian. But they wouldn’t believe me. Maybe it was because my skin is dark. They wouldn’t listen to me, they wouldn’t drive me home so I could show them all of the papers that proved what I was saying. Instead, they drove me to a jail cell.”

Our fear has an impact on people’s lives and when we let each of these fears rule us ---we can either build each other up or destroy each other.

Fear is a strong part of the yetzer hara (the evil inclination). The fear enters you, you give a name, a shape, a character to that fear, and then it lives in you-- you walk around the world with it. People are no longer people, they are caricatures of the fears we have internalized and we can destroy lives by setting up a society that lives in fear rather than with a narrative of who we are and what we want to be.

It’s not just a societal problem I speak of, a problem of this election season..it’s a problem that plagues us in our lives. We fear a person, a space, a confrontation and so we avoid it or we build a wall around it or we demonize it and we live in cages of darkness and disconnection demonizing the one who hurt us as other. PUsing away complexity and tenderness, and the ability to see another’s perspective, another truth, a more complicated but holy way of living.

Fear is not going away, hate won’t disappear. I actually don’t think it is possible. It’s part of the human condition.

But what I want is for us to transform what we do with those feelings...

There is a wonderful story told in the Talmud about the Yetzer haRa- it comes within a line of stories where the Rabbis are trying to destroy the yetzer ha ra forever (the evil inclination)...

The rabbis cried to God- We don't want the yetzer haRa anymore- it has destroyed the Sanctuary, burned the Temple, killed the righteous, driven all Israel into exile and is still dancing in our midst!

The rabbis ordered a fast for 3 days and then the yetzer came forth from the Holy of Holies like a fiery lion.. At that moment a prophet of Israel said to them--fine. "cast him in a lead barrel" (See Zech. 5:8)...But the Yetzer said to them, "Realize that if you kill me, the world is finished." So the rabbis did it. They put him in a barrel and held him for three days, but then they looked in the whole land of Israel and not an egg could be found. So they asked, "What shall we do now?" ...So they put out his eyes and let him go; (Yoma 69b).

So the rabbis want to get rid of the yetzer- banish him from the earth. And they are given the permission to do that! But they realize when they do that that something changes about the world. Not an egg could be found.

Nobody, not even the animals wanted to have sex when the yetzer was banned. Without the yetzer, there is no possibility for life. No desire. Without the yetzer we would lack ambition, we would lack anger, a certain intensity of living. So banishing it is not possible. We need it.

So if we need it...what do we do with it? How do we live with it? The rabbis cripple it in this story by taking out its eyes.

In real life, they create a system to harness it, to contain it, to use its energy for good in the world and to contain its possibility for evil.

Here's an example. Sex. Sex is not bad. It's great! But desire, unchecked is yetzer territory. So here's what the rabbis did. They said ok we need sex, but we need to give a vessel to keep it in control.

The vessel for them was marriage. Now you have to remember that they were hetero-normative --- I also want to acknowledge, without going any further that today in the progressive Jewish world we know that many explore intimacy without the context of marriage and know themselves better for this experience. But having rules for what is a deeply vulnerable and potentially dangerous area of the yetzer is critical.

So for the rabbis- marriage was their container- their way of giving a boundary to the yetzer- let's explore sex in the confines of marriage.

There are rules for sex within a marriage. They include: A man never forcing his wife to have sex. A couple may not have sexual relations while drunk or quarreling, when one is asleep, when one hates the other, or after he has decided in his heart to divorce her. Sex may never be used as a weapon against a spouse, either by depriving the spouse of sex or by compelling it. It is a serious offense to use sex (or lack thereof) to punish or manipulate a spouse. Notice that make up sex is not prohibited.

Sex is the woman's right, not the man's. A man has a duty to give his wife sex regularly and to ensure that sex is pleasurable for her.

The woman's right to sexual intercourse is referred to as onah, and it is one of a wife's three basic rights (the others are food and clothing), which a husband may not reduce. The Talmud specifies both the quantity and quality of sex that a man must give his wife. It specifies the frequency of sexual obligation based on the husband's occupation.

And traditionally sex is forbidden within marriage during niddah- a woman's menstrual period. It is only after her period has stopped and she has immersed in the mikveh that sex is again permissible.

So what are the rabbis doing here? They are creating rules for engagement so that sex is enjoyed- so that we don't banish desire but we contain it and we give it a place. They know that desire unchecked can be a very dangerous thing.

Just look at what emerged in our country this week. Words of assault towards women from a man who would like to hold the office that assumes the greatest power in the world. You want to see an example

of the yetzer untamed? Just google Presidential candidate and lewd. Seriously...you don't need any other search terms.

To go back to sex---I am not proposing an end to the sexual revolution. I think exploration is positive. And we should not get caught up in the fact that the rabbis were talking about containing the yetzer in hetero-normative marriage. They were using the social constructs of their day- and had they lived to see today, I believe with all of my heart that they would have seen monogamous relationships whether hetero, gay, trans, also as wonderful places to transform the yetzer hara into something tov. You see the tool that they created was taking something potentially explosive and ugly and putting into the container of the good. That's where it had to sit in order to allow a human to be her best self.

That tool can be used anywhere, anytime. You hear yourself going towards the ra? Don't banish it, don't beat yourself up over it- build a container of good to put it in. The good will give it contours and boundaries and take away its power. It will give it a way to live that is productive and will help the world move forward.

I think this is what law is doing when it works... It creates a structure to contain behaviours in us that are less humane and more base. It helps us realize our best selves. And when the structures that we build to contain the yetzer- the laws that we construct no longer work- when those laws begin to unleash the yetzer rather than contain it- well- then it's our duty, our obligation to go examine the law and amend it so that we can live up to our highest values.

So here we find ourselves tonight. In one of the greatest containers for the yetzer that the rabbis every built. Bring the ugly, the dark, the sinful here- say- no sing out loud all of the places that the yetzer got out of control- own it, feel it, admit it and use the tools of teshuva, tefilah and tzedaka- so look inward, admit the sin, commit to transform it, pray like hell, and give what you can to transform the yetzer and to take away its power.

The only rule? You've gotta be committed to being better and not returning to that same sin again and again and again. So let's do this.