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The Israelites returned from Babylonian exile to find the Holy Temple destroyed, burned. Even in the sanctuary no one was safe; the priest's sons were found dead. But the *Yetzer Hara*—the Evil Inclination—still breathed in that most holy of places.

They wailed. They cried: “The *Yetzer Ha-Ra*, the Evil Inclination, has destroyed the Sanctuary, burnt the Temple, killed the righteous, driven all of Israel into exile, and it is still dancing around among us!”

The leaders prayed: “Please God, You who brought this evil spirit into being so that we could receive a reward by resisting him – we want neither him nor the reward!

“Erase the *Yetzer Ha-Ra* – the Evil Inclination, from every person's heart. Although it is good for us to triumph over the evil inclination, it is better to have no evil at all.”

In response to their prayers, the heavens opened and a note fluttered to the earth from above. In it – one word: *Emet*. Truth.

For three days and three nights they fasted. They prayed with such *kavanah*, with such intention, that all of a sudden, the *Yetzer Ha-Ra* came charging out of the Holy of Holies like a fiery lion.

“Catch him!” the people cried and they tried to seize the beast but only managed to get—a single hair. Evil is hard to grasp. The creature bellowed so loudly that its cry was heard a thousand miles away.

Eventually they did manage to capture the *Yetzer Ha-Ra*. They put it into a lead pot and sealed the lid.

For three days they held it captive. But during this time, the chickens stopped laying eggs. Not one egg could be found for the sick in all the land. From this the people learned that the suffocation of the *Yetzer Ha-Ra* would not only get rid of human destruction, but it would also smother the passions indispensable for civilization. The destruction of the *Yetzer Ha-Ra* would be the destruction of the world. There was no recourse but to release him.

“Perhaps we can pray to the heavens for *Rachame Apalga*, ‘half mercy’,” said the people. “Let there be lust, but let it be restricted to one's own spouse. Let there be ambition

and aggressiveness, but let it be restricted to noble and peaceful ends. Let there be anger, but let it be limited to righteous indignation.”

“No,” said the sages. “*Palga birkiah lo yahave*” – “Halves are not granted from heaven.” The plan was abandoned.

So they lifted the lid of the pot, blinded the creature and set it free. Once again it roamed the world, but its power, so they say, was greatly diminished.

(Adapted from “The Capture and Release of the Yetzer Ha-Ra,” author unknown, pp. 29-30 *Yom Kippur Readings: Inspiration, Information, Contemplation*, ed. Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins, based on Masechet Yoma 69b)

I love this story. Granted, it's a strange story. It's based on a page from Tractate Yoma, from the Talmud. It teaches us a little bit about how the ancient rabbis understood our impulse to do wrong. Our *yetzer ha-ra*, our evil inclination, is part of who we are, and that's not entirely bad. It plays a powerful role in our lives. We all have strong tendencies towards greed, arrogance, and selfishness. Our purpose when we come together over these High Holy Days is not to beat ourselves up about what we have done or worry about what we are capable of doing, but to really see this force for what it is, to confront it and try to understand it.

There is something even positive about the *yetzer ha-ra*. There is a classic midrash on the Creation story that makes the same point as the story I just told.

“And God saw all that God had made, and found it very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.” Nahman said in R. Samuel's name: “Very good” refers to the Good Desire; and “very good” refers to the Evil Desire. Can the Evil Desire be very good? Yes! But without the Evil Desire, no one would build a house, marry, have children, or do business. (Genesis Rabbah, 9:7)

The Rabbis believed that the *yetzer ha-ra*, the Evil Desire, holds life-sustaining power. It's a challenging idea, that there can be something good – not in Evil – but in our evil desires or inclinations. The Rabbis saw our evil desires as the basis of our creativity and our productivity. If we try to repress it life grinds to a halt.

Not only do we have the *yetzer ha-ra*, taught the Rabbis, but we also have the *yetzer ha-tov*, the impulse to do good, within us. This leads us to to live honestly and compassionately, to make choices that reflect what we really believe in. The *yetzer ha-ra* and the *yetzer ha-tov* battle within us, and when a situation arises and we have to make a difficult moral decision it's our choice whether we listen to our *yetzer ha-ra* or our *yetzer ha-tov*.

I'm sort of uncomfortable with these texts. I think they might actually lead us to believe that succumbing to our *yetzer ha-ra* isn't such a big deal. If the Evil Desire holds life-sustaining power, then it's not so bad if I cheat my neighbor or yell at my child.

And yet – I think we know when we do wrong, and we have a good sense that we shouldn't do wrong, that we shouldn't sin.

Now I know that sin is a loaded word, and we recoil from thinking or talking about sin. It's true, most of us don't go around discussing our sins. We equate talk of sin with a theology that's harsh and punitive.

But it's important that we take seriously the sins we commit. Perhaps the Hebrew word – *cheyt* – is a better choice, as in the "Al Cheyt." On these holy days we recite, "*Al Cheyt she'chatanu lefanecha*," -- "For the sin that we have committed against You..." and then name a sin as we pound our chests.

While *cheyt* means "sin," it also means missing, as in missing the way or missing the mark. This is much more comforting, so we often use the image of "missing the mark" when we talk about what we have done wrong. I wonder, though, if this image lets us off the hook too easily and lead us, again, to think that sin – or whatever we call it – isn't such a big deal. "Missing the mark" sounds so innocuous, like "I had a bad day, I missed the mark."

As Rabbi Richard Hirsh writes,

...I no longer find the metaphor "life as a darts game" credible. It's a modern, Jewish, liberal dodge to think that if we just try a little bit harder next year we'll get closer to the circle. And it underestimates the propensity for corruption in human life and the tendency toward wrongdoing. Our lives are measured not only by what we do, but also by who we are. (Richard Hirsh, *Sh'ma: A Journal of Jewish Ideas*, "Roundtable: Thinking About Sin," September 1, 2008)

We're sugar-coating sin when we describe it as missing the mark. That's okay, I think, when we're talking about little indiscretions. But there are many things that we do wrong that are significant and serious. We break people's trust in us, we behave dishonestly through our speech and through our actions, we violate our deepest ideals.

Sin is about failure, how we fail ourselves and each other. "Sin is found in the dark corners of our lives," writes Rabbi Hirsh.

"...[I]n our ability to corrupt what is decent; to destroy in one thoughtless moment of irresponsibility what can take a lifetime to build; to deceive others and ourselves; in our compromises, excuses, disingenuousness and secrets; and

in our inability to hold ourselves...accountable, instead of excusable. (Richard Hirsh, "Can a Reconstructionist Sin?" [www.jewishrecon.org](http://www.jewishrecon.org))

I think it's really hard to hold ourselves accountable for our sins, for our wrongdoings. Some of us don't want to confront what we've done wrong because it's uncomfortable. We don't like dealing with how we've hurt or betrayed other people. So we ignore our actions or justify them or distance ourselves from them. We focus on other people's faults and don't apply the same critical judgment to ourselves.

But if we can't assess ourselves honestly then we can't walk the difficult path of doing *teshuvah*, of making amends, seeking forgiveness, and turning back to our best selves.

Some of us, though, have a different problem. We are obsessively self-critical. We beat ourselves up about every transgression. The thing is, being this self-critical is not much better than not being critical enough. We hide behind perfectionism or shame, and being overly self-critical distracts us from the real work of *teshuvah*. If we convince ourselves that we aren't good enough to do *teshuvah* or are incapable of doing *teshuvah*, then we absolve ourselves of doing the hard work it requires.

I think the hardest thing about *teshuvah* is that to do it right we have to see ourselves for who we really are – not who we think we are or who we wish we were. Just to see ourselves as we are, with all of our flaws and inadequacies, as well as all of our talents and gifts. In the story I began with the leaders prayed and a note fluttered down from heaven with the word "Emet" or "truth" on it. In confronting our *yetzer ha-ra* and in doing *teshuvah*, we have to tell the truth about ourselves.

But instead we construct identities – of the perfect parent, the devoted spouse, the caring sibling, the indispensable community member, the brilliant colleague, the trusted co-worker – or even the underachiever, the depressive, the unlovable one. But these are just identities, the shells we create for others to see. We spend so much of our lives faking it or pretending to be who we're not. I think we're afraid – afraid to encounter ourselves as we truly are behind the façade.

If we can come to terms with our capacity for wrongdoing and see it as a real part of who we are, and if we can then confront our sins, we can stop living at a distance from ourselves and embrace who we really are.

I think that's why I like the story that I began with. It's honest. Our evil inclination leads us to sin, and that carries with it all the hurt and pain that ensue from wronging another person. But there is something holy in that inclination. Something that's worthwhile. The Rabbis understand it as the passion that sustains the world. I see it as the raw, naked essence of ourselves, hidden deep within us. What makes it holy is that it's our truest self, behind the constructed identity.

As we spend these Days of Awe together, let us look at ourselves honestly, for who we really are, instead of who we wish we were or who we pretend to be. Only then can we really begin the task of *teshuvah*, of setting things right, in the year to come.

*L'shanah tovah* – may it be a good year.