

Yetzer Hara vs. Yetzer Hatov

Rabbi Mona Alfi

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My grandparents raised me on stories of the Depression and WWII – a world that always felt so different than the one I have lived in. Victory gardens, rationing so the troops could have what they needed, the government coming in and building schools and parks, paying artists and architects to create, and paying workers to make those visions a reality. They described an America where people pitched in, did their share, and cared about each other. An America that seemed to dovetail beautifully with our Jewish values of *tikkun olam* and communal responsibility.

It was a shock and profound disappointment to me when I went to college and took classes that showed me a very different image of that time. I learned about how unregulated greed made the market crash, and about those who were ardently opposed to Roosevelt's "New Deal" and the creation of Social Security and the Work Projects Act. I learned about Father Coughlin and the Isolationists who opposed the US getting involved in WWII and stopping Hitler, and how our armed forces were racially segregated and how we rounded up innocent American citizens and sent them to internment camps for the crime of having the wrong ethnicity.

It feels as though there have always been two Americas – one where people work together for a greater good, an America where we believe that we have a responsibility to help each other and to live up to the highest ideals embedded in our Constitution, and then there is another America, that is fueled by tribalism and fear, and always at war with itself.

I've often thought of these two very different, and equally true visions of America. And in the last few months I've seen these conflicting visions playing out in a deadly game of life and death in the confusing and contradictory ways we have dealt with this Pandemic.

I have always believed that a crisis reveals who a person is, or what a country values, or what a community believes in. And we are seeing that now. Saving lives or saving the economy – which will we prioritize?

In the Avot d'Rabbi Natan, a 3rd century collection of *midrashim*, we are taught that when we are born, we are born with a *yetzer hara*, often translated as our evil inclination, and by the age of 13 we develop our *yetzer hatov* – our inclination to do good. In other words, our instinct to be primarily self oriented is something we are born with, but our sense of morality, of compassion and caring for others is something that has to be taught to us, and nurtured within us.

And even then, there is a lifelong daily struggle between our *yetzer hara* and our *yetzer hatov* – a struggle between doing what is easy and convenient and in our own self interest, and doing

what we know is the right thing to do, and doing what might not benefit us at all, but be in the best interest of those around us.

However, we are not taught to destroy the *yetzer hara* within us, but to bring it into balance with our *yetzer hatov*, because it isn't good when one side or the other takes over. The *yetzer hara* is what fuels us to do better, to work harder, to be creative and to succeed. And those things aren't inherently bad, as long as they are checked by the inclination to care about others, to play by the rules, and to help those who have less than us.

And conversely, it's not good to let the *yetzer hatov* take over either, because while it's good to give charity, it's not good to give so much that you're not able to care for yourself or your own family. And so we struggle every day to balance what is in our own personal interest verses being a productive and responsible member of society.

But it's not just for an individual's own sake that we need to balance these inclinations, because a community, or a society, or a country, is a reflection of the *collective* choices made by individuals.

I was so proud of an article I read last week which stated that for the first time in American history, every single synagogue was closed.¹ Even in states where synagogues were allowed to stay open, they closed their doors for the sake of *pikuach nefesh* – for the sake of saving lives.

And so while across the country many faiths are demanding that their governments allow them to gather in worship, not only do we not see Jewish organizations demanding the same, but rather many synagogues shut their doors before they were even mandated to, and most synagogues, including our own, are already planning possible alternatives to traditional High Holiday services because we do not believe that worshipping in the same room is worth the risk of getting others gravely ill, or even dead.

Our history has taught us that what happens to one person can affect the safety and well being of an entire community.

As America is in the midst of this debate about when and how to reopen, the Jewish community has made it clear where we stand. We have cancelled our youth and summer programs and we are urging congregations to wait to meet in person until the medical authorities tell us that it is safe. And yes, these choices do mean that we are hurting financially and organizationally. The Union of Reform Judaism has taken a massive financial hit by closing it's summer camps and our in person programs and had to lay off 20% of it's staff as a result. But how could we run camps when we do not know what sort of risk we would be putting our children in? How do we open our synagogue doors when the people who come one week might end up being the people we

¹ "For the first time, there are literally no synagogues legally open in America," by Aiden Pink, The Forward, April 28, 2020, <https://forward.com/news/national/444737/synagogues-coronavirus-stay-at-home/>

have to say Kaddish for the next week? What sort of citizens would we be if we risked creating a hot spot for the virus to flourish in?

Over the summer, and in the months to follow, we will have to continue to be creative in sustaining a community without walls, we will need to find new ways to come together in spirit if not in person, to celebrate our holidays and engage in learning in ways we could not have envisioned even a few months ago. We will have to adapt so that when we do come together we can do so safely, not only for our own sake, but for the sake of the larger community.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוֵּנוּ לַעֲסוֹק בְּצָרְכֵי צִבּוּר

Barukh atah adonai eloheinu melekh ha'olam asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu la'asok betzorkhei tzibur.

How full of blessing you are, ETERNAL ONE, our God, majesty of the Universe, who has consecrated us with Your commands, and commanded us to occupy ourselves with the needs of the community.²

² <https://www.ritualwell.org/ritual/blessing-community-work>