

## Do bad thoughts break commandments?

In this week's Torah portion, *Vayikra*, we begin the Book of Leviticus, which gives details about the various animal sacrifices the Israelites had to bring to the Temple in biblical times. It opens with the '*olah*, or "burnt offering" -- the original holocaust. It is completely burned on the altar, and none of it can be eaten by anyone, unlike other sacrifices. '*Olah* comes from the root *ayin-lamed-heh*, which means "ascension". The word *aliyah* has the same root, and means moving "up" to Israel or going "up" to the bimah to read from the Torah. The '*olah* sacrifice represents a desire to commune with God and submit to His will.

The Talmud and the Midrash explain that the *olah* is brought to atone for sinful thoughts, or "*hirhur halev*" [R. Shim'on Bar Yochai in Vayikra R. 7:3; Yoma Y 8:7, 45b]. So, apparently, sinful thoughts require divine forgiveness. Indeed, on Yom Kippur, we ask God's forgiveness for the 44 sins in the Ashkenazic list, the "*Al chet*", one of which is sinful thoughts:

*Al chet shechatanu lefanecha b'harhor ha-lev.*

For the sin that we have committed before You by sinful thoughts.

The Midrash draws a distinction between "sin" and "sinful thought": A "sin" is a sin and is prohibited, but a "sinful thought" is not a sin:

Our Sages taught: The burnt offering is completely holy, because it was not brought for sins... but rather for thoughts of the heart. [Tanchuma Tzav 13:13]

There are other references to avoiding bad thoughts in Jewish lore. The Shulchan Aruch, or Code of Jewish Law, tells us that when you put on tefillin in the morning, you must be careful to avoid thinking about women. [Orach Chayim, Siman 38] The Rema adds that if you can't help yourself, it's better to not put on tefillin at all. You are not allowed to think about the Torah in the bathroom. [Orach Chayim, Siman 85]. On Shabbat, you should not think about work matters. [Orach Chayim, Siman 306]. On Tisha B'av, you should not think about studying Torah.

[Orach Chayim, Siman 554]. The Talmud says that there are three transgressions which no man escapes even for a single day: Sinful thoughts, expecting immediate results from prayer, and slander. [Bava Batra 164b]

All this may come as a surprise to many. After all, we are taught that Judaism is a religion of action, not a religion of thought or belief; a religion of deed, not of creed. We are judged by what we do, not by what we think. Our mind is our last refuge, and should be inviolable. Our thoughts are private and cause no harm. Some even say that fantasies should be encouraged, and are a sign of a healthy mind.

The Talmud says:

*Hirhurei 'averah kashu me'averah.* [Yoma 29a]

What does it mean? The word "*kasheh*" means "hard". So literally, it says:

Sinful thoughts are harder than sin.

But "harder" in what sense? Some translate it as:

Sinful thoughts are worse than sin,

implying that merely thinking about transgressing commandments is a worse offense than actually transgressing them! Others translate it as:

Sinful thoughts are more difficult than sin,

implying only that it is more difficult to stop yourself from having bad thoughts, than to stop yourself from acting on them.

Rashi adopts the second translation: Ridding yourself of bad thoughts is more difficult than stopping yourself from committing bad actions. And this extra difficulty brings a greater reward, because the Mishna teaches:

The reward for doing a good deed is in proportion to its difficulty. [Avot 5:26]

Maimonides, on the other hand, adopts the first translation: Sinful thoughts are a worse offense than the sin itself! In his *Guide for the Perplexed*, he writes:

If a person sins, it is... due to his animal side. But thoughts are the treasure of a person; [they distinguish him from animals]... So if someone sins with his thoughts, then he has sinned with his greatest asset ... [because] the purpose of the mind is to cling to God, not to slip below [to the animal level]. [Guide for the Perplexed 3:8]

How do we reconcile these two positions: That bad thoughts are sinful and require atonement; and that you can't help your thoughts and must not be punished for them? In the standard Jewish fashion: By saying “You are right” and “You are right”!

Here is how the Talmud resolves it:

[There is no punishment for mere intention to commit evil], for it is said [in the Book of Psalms]:

If I saw iniquity in my heart, The Lord would not hear. [Ps. 66:18].  
When intention [is followed by action] the Holy One, blessed be He, combines it with the action [and punishes both]. When intention [is not followed by action] the Holy One, blessed be He, does not combine it with the action [and there is therefore no punishment.] [Kiddushin 40a]

Here is what is particularly artful in this teaching. On the one hand, the rabbis could not very well say that bad thoughts are punished, because Judaism is clearly a religion of action, and not one of thought or belief. But on the other hand, they are reluctant to allow unbridled bad thoughts. If you go off in a corner and fantasize about all the terrible things you are going to do to someone you don't like, this is a very unhealthy situation. So the rabbis steer us away from it by warning us that, if bad thoughts are followed by bad actions, the punishment will be both for the thoughts and the action. In other words, you will get extra punishment just for the bad thoughts. But if ALL you have is the bad thoughts, there is no punishment. However, there is still a need to repent for having them, because they are unhealthy. This insightful teaching takes human nature into account, as the Talmud always does.

Also, there is no denying that our thoughts influence our attitude and our actions. Research into new drugs routinely shows that many patients get better when they think they are getting a revolutionary miracle drug, when in fact they are only getting a placebo with no medicine in it. A recent *Scientific American* article, entitled “Your Thoughts Can Release Abilities Beyond Normal Limits”, reports on the results of many studies along these lines. [Ozgun Atasoy, 13 August 2013]

So, to conclude: Evil thoughts ARE wrong, but no punishment is prescribed for them, and there is no actual commandment to refrain from having them. Such a commandment would, at any rate, be impossible to follow, and the Torah itself says that it does not

command us to do anything we can't do. The Torah has four punishments for transgressions: Execution, flogging, fines, and shunning (no jail), and none apply here. Nevertheless, we should try hard, for our own sake, to avoid having evil thoughts, and it is proper that we should apologize on Yom Kippur for having them. The Sages say that the antidote to bad thoughts is the study of Torah. [Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, Tanna d'Bei Eliyahu Zuta 16].

Shabbat shalom.