

Rabbi Janet Offel
Kol Nidre 5770
Temple Kol Tikvah

Moral Authority

What a year this has been. In the Jewish community alone there have been multiple scandals: Bernie Madoff, the New York organ transplant outrage, the New Jersey money-laundering scheme... It seems as if every morning we open the newspaper, oh excuse me, that's right, it's 2009, so that means we upload our iPhone, Blackberry or Kindle, and wait to see what latest scandal might await our blurry eyes, before the morning cup of coffee.

And it's not just the scandals. A recent front-page article in the *Los Angeles Times* was titled, "What's gotten into us?" about the recent epidemic of high-profile outbursts, from Kanye West's offensive disruption of Taylor Swift's acceptance speech at the Video Music Awards, to Representative Joe Wilson's rude and unprecedented interruption of President Obama before a joint session of Congress, to tennis star Serena Willam's profanity riddled argument with a line judge at the U.S. Open.¹ All in the course of less than a week.

Just what has gotten into us?

Theories abound for the general disdain of others and lack of respect that seem to be the hallmark of our world today. But one thing seems abundantly clear: too many people today are valued for their wealth, their technical competence, their mass "sell ability" rather than their personal integrity. Even the very concept of personal integrity is under assault as more and more people deem it appropriate to deride another's integrity simply because they are in disagreement about an issue. And the whole concept of moral authority, "the quality or characteristic of being respected for having good character or knowledge, especially as a source of guidance or an exemplar of proper conduct,"² is considered by many today to be a quaint, old fashioned notion mired in a long ago time and place.

A few months ago, in the wake of the multiple scandals that have plagued the Jewish community this year, I came across a quote from JJ Goldberg, Editor of the national Jewish newspaper, *The Forward*. Goldberg was speaking strictly from the perspective of the Jewish community, but his words go much deeper and farther:

"Before the modern age, Jews lived in ghettos. They could tax themselves. *Tzedakah* was not voluntary. *Shabbes* wasn't voluntary. The first synagogue in America, Shearith Israel in New York, adopted a rule saying that if you violated *Shabbes* you got fined. It didn't work. People just resigned from the synagogue. [The community] had lost enforcement power. And once you've lost enforcement power, you've got to ask for it. And once you've got to ask for money, you become dependent on the wealthy. Rabbis now depend on the goodwill of a few rich people. And so the balance of power between the moralists and the hedonists shifts. There used to be a check. The moral authority of the

Jewish community had enforcement power. Now it's around for entertainment... So there is no more moral authority.³

A month or so ago I was chatting with someone about the broad outlines of this sermon and he cautioned me to be careful. Don't forget, he said, many of the moral authorities of the past were the ministers, priests, rabbis and others who were able to get away with outrageous conduct, simply because they were considered untouchable moral authorities. The person to whom I was speaking was a member of a local Episcopalian church, and I realized that he had a good point. Certainly, no religious denomination has been immune to the sexual molestation scandals that first surfaced in the Catholic church. Although JJ Goldberg might like to bemoan the moral authority that has been stripped from clergy, one must wonder to what extent it was necessary in order to give people the courage to stand up to unhealthy, damaging leaders and authorities.

Many of us know stories of those caught in the web of unhealthy clergy leaders shielded by their communities and their colleagues and are happy to be moving away from that kind of societal condition. But where do we go from here?

Last year, on Yom Kippur morning I spoke about rights vs. responsibilities, and the very Jewish notion of our responsibilities, individually and communally. Judaism is a religion of the individual, each with a responsibility to the communal whole. We don't have clergy acting as mediating influences between each one of us and God. And in this post-modern world, that is the place to begin in our search for moral authority—deep within each one of us.

No surprise, our tradition has much to say about this topic. Judaism teaches that each of us, within our hearts, are laden with two inclinations: the inclination to do good, known as the yetzer tov, and the inclination to do evil, or yetzer hara.

It is very easy to define the yetzer tov or good inclination. It is the moral conscience, the inner voice that reminds us to do the right thing. Some say that we aren't actually born with a yetzer tov—after all, when was the last time that you heard a baby stop crying because it realized that if it cried too loudly, it might wake up everyone in the house, or a 3 year old who gladly handed over his or her favorite toy in the midst of playtime to their sibling or friend who wished to play with it. Yes, there are a few saintly children out there, but in general, our tradition says that the yetzer tov doesn't come into its own in our hearts until the age of thirteen. The age of maturity.

Our yetzer tov, our predilection for good, isn't what gets us into trouble though. Rather it is the yetzer hara, that little devil that we like to think is sitting on our shoulder, which leads us down the path to evil, lust and temptation.

The Babylonian Talmud relates a story. Antoninus asked Rabbi, "When does the Evil Impulse begin to influence man—from the time the embryo is formed or from the time the baby comes into the world?"

"From the time of formation," answered Rabbi.

"If that is so," objected Antoninus, "the baby would begin to rebel in its mother's womb. It must be from the time it emerges from the womb."

After that, Rabbi said, “This lesson Antoninus taught me and Scripture supports his argument, for it is said: ‘Sin is the demon at the door, whose urge is toward you’” (Genesis 4:7).⁴

In other words, that little devil on our shoulder, or from a Jewish perspective, in our heart, is born right alongside us. But the yetzer hara isn’t the desire to do evil in the way that we think of it from a Western societal perspective. The rabbis are very quick to point out that the yetzer hara is actually a good thing. The yetzer hara doesn’t will us to cause senseless harm per se, rather it is understood more readily as our selfish nature, the desire that each of us must possess to survive in the world: the necessity to satisfy our personal needs for such things as food, shelter, and sexual fulfillment. Our tradition teaches that since both the yetzer tov and yetzer hara were created by God, and all things created by God are good, without the yetzer hara a person would not build a house, marry, beget children or conduct business affairs. Our tradition understands the yetzer hara as something internal to a person, not an external force acting on a person. How many of us remember Flip Wilson’s character of Geraldine from the Flip Wilson Show? Remember her famous line, “The devil made me do it?” Sorry, Geraldine, but it wasn’t the devil, it was the yetzer hara in your own nature, unhindered by the yetzer tov. The devil on our shoulder or in our heart is merely a personification of our own selfish desires—not something external to us that is somehow forcing us to act out.

As Rabbi Norman Lamm notes, in Western thought, opinions have generally clustered around two opposite attitudes, represented by Rousseau and Freud. Rousseau believed that man is essentially a “noble savage,” that his instincts are pure and constructive, but that he is corrupted by society. Freud, on the other hand, maintained that man’s essential nature is his id or libido, that it is grasping and acquisitive and sexual, but that these primal instincts are modified by society in the form of the super-ego. For Rosseau, then, humanity’s natural instinct is essentially that of the yetzer tov or good inclination; for Freud it is the yetzer hara that rules over us.⁵

Judaism, in contradiction to both Rosseau and Freud posits that a person is neither completely beast nor completely angel, each of us housing within us both a yetzer tov and a yetzer hara. Two sides to human nature: one constructive and one destructive. Yet instead of being antagonists, at their best the yetzer tov and yetzer hara work together: the yetzer tov able to identify the goals to which the enormous undirected powers of the yetzer hara can be applied.

The great 2nd century sage, Rabbi Meir, a man steeped in the knowledge of Rome as well as Judaism, noted that the Torah, in describing the various stages of God’s creation of the world, tells us that at the end of each step in creation, God said, “It is good.” After the creation of Adam, however, God said, “And behold it is very good.” What was “good” about Adam, and what was “very good?” Rabbi Meir answered: tov, “good”—that is the yetzer tov, the good inclination. And tov, “very good”—that is the yetzer hara, the evil inclination! The yetzer tov is only good; the yetzer hara is—very good! And the reason is clear Rabbi Meir teaches: devoid of the passion, aggressiveness and acquisitiveness

that the yetzer hara provides, a person would never build a business or have the ambition to further one's knowledge or get married and have children. Without the blessed yetzer hara, there could be no progress, no civilization, no culture, no human community. It is when the yetzer hara is allowed to stumble forth blindly and unchecked, that a person can wreak havoc and destruction all around him or her. Yet when it is channeled by the yetzer tov, it builds, creates, and constructs for the benefit of not only the individual but all of society.⁶

At this time of year in particular, this time of tshuvah, of returning, we are called upon to return to our basic self, to accept the yetzer hara, but to take it in hand and control it. We are commanded not only to harness but to exploit for good the yetzer hara that rages within.

This channeling of the yetzer hara requires enormous moral strength. But, in reality, it can't come from some outside moral authority, for each of us holds within us both inclinations. According to our tradition, it is up to each of us to channel the appetite. Each and every one of us, confronted in our own lives with a great moral decision, has within us the yetzer tov, informing us that one path is mostly right and the other wrong, one moral and one immoral, and must make a choice. At that point the yetzer tov has completed its task and each of us has a choice with respect to our yetzer hara: will we use all that blind energy and passion, strength and power for the wrong decision, or channel it in the way that our yetzer tov has deduced is right and noble and decent?⁷

Judaism calls upon us to bring to each and every decision that we make not just our yetzer tov, but our yetzer hara as well, demanding that we use that yetzer hara for good: for the betterment of ourselves, our families, our communities and our society.

But the problem today, quite frankly, get's back to one of my original premises: that integrity and good conduct are considered old and outmoded concepts, consigned to the dustbins of a past age. Even within the Jewish community.

Sadly, I remember when Michael Milken was brought down all those many years ago. Throughout the Jewish community rabbis and communal leaders were talking about "blood money" and whether they had a responsibility to return the monies donated by Milken. But this time around, when the individual losses caused by men like Bernard Madoff far outweighed those of a Michael Milken, I have heard nary a peep out of our national communal leaders about "blood money." Rather what I have heard time and again from those who gave their own money and the money of their institutional bodies over to Madoff is a sense of being "stung." Nothing of the individual or communal greed that allowed these people and institutions to never question the ridiculously high returns they were receiving year after year, with nary a downturn.

Today, our Jewish communal institutions are as broken as our larger society. To be a lay leader in many national Jewish institutions one must come to the table with atleast a middle five figure annual donation. You can't even be involved in any meaningful way in many communal institutions today without coming onboard with enormous amounts of money. The most used word in Jewish fundraising today is trust-funds and the hunt for young adults coming into

vast amounts of money through the death of their parents or grandparents takes up much of the time and energy of Jewish fundraisers. Is it any surprise that so many of the great Jewish money men who have fallen in this past year were among the most respected movers and shakers in the Jewish community?

The quest for wealth, technical competence and mass “sellability” is driven by, you guessed it, the yetzer hara. Where we are getting into trouble isn’t there, though. Where we are getting into trouble as individuals, as communal institutions and as a society is in the lack of regard for and complete dismissal of the yetzer tov, the voice of integrity and honor that is also housed within us. The yetzer hara is a powerful force, being made all the more powerful by the lack of influence of the yetzer tov in post-modern America.

As we enter into this holiest of holidays, it is time for us to take a collective breath. To embrace and venerate the yetzer tov in both our personal and communal lives. To use this coming year as a year of tshuvah, of return, to the best that is within each of us as individuals and to the best that is within our communal institutions and our society. Only then can we again say: *Baruch ata Adonai, borei et hakol*. Blessed are You Adonai, Creator of all—both that which is good as well as that which is very good.

¹ “What’s gotten into us?,” by Robin Abcarian, *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 16, 2009, pg. A1.

² Definition from *Wiktionary*, http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/moral_authority.

³ Quote of JJ Goldberg, Editor of *The Forward*, at: <http://www.muzzlewatch.com/2009/05/20/jj-goldberg-on-jewish-power-again/>

⁴ Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 91b as retold in *Voices of Wisdom: Jewish Ideals and Ethics for Everyday Living*, Francine Klagsbrun, Boston: David R. Godine, Publisher, 1990, pg. 410.

⁵ “Heart Transformations,” Rabbi Norman Lamm, The Jewish Center, September 21, 1968, MS. Pg. 2.

⁶ *Ibid*, pg. 5-6.

⁷ *Ibid*, pg. 8-9.