
Binding the Beast: *Yetzer Hara* and the Psychology of Evil

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The words reached me over the Internet, but I could sense their desperation as surely as if they had been spoken in my office: “My alters have expressed a growing desire to eliminate the host (me) because in their opinion, I am nothing but a weak, inconsistent shell...How do I combat this growing rebellion?”

As a psychiatrist, I see mostly patients suffering from some form of depression or anxiety. I am skeptical whenever I hear of someone diagnosed with “multiple personality disorder.” There has been so much hype in the popular press about this condition, made famous in books like *Sybil* and *The Three Faces of Eve*, and now termed “dissociative identity disorder.” The name change reflects the fact that sufferers do not really have more than one personality; rather, their personalities are fragmented into sub-personalities—“alters,” or alternate identity states—each of which may serve some critical defensive or symbolic function. Most individuals with this condition have suffered repetitive physical or sexual abuse in childhood, and their personality fragmentation reflects the self’s attempts to fend off the horrors of such abuse. But sometimes, the sub-personalities are themselves tormentors. One alter may rise up in anger or disgust at another, creating a psychic battlefield in the afflicted individual.

“How do I combat this growing rebellion?” my young correspondent asked.

What could I say to someone in the throes of such a life-or-death struggle—at least, so far as the young man’s psyche was concerned? Much of what I wound up saying to him came from my professional knowledge of this puzzling disorder. But the underlying message came from Talmudic Judaism. In Isaac Bashevis Singer’s posthumous novel, *Shadows on the Hudson*, one of the characters contends that the Jews are “the first people to bind the beast in themselves and to teach other people how to bind it...” While scholars might argue that the Hindu tradition is at least as entitled to this encomium, there is no question that “binding the beast” is a central preoccupation in Judaism. In both the Talmudic and mystical literature of Judaism, our rabbis posit the existence of “two hearts”—or more precisely, two passions that stem from the heart: the passion for good (*yetzer hatov*) and the passion for evil (*yetzer hara*).

It might seem intuitively obvious that the *yetzer hara* would be viewed negatively in traditional Judaism. After all, what good could possibly come of evil? And yet, the situation is more complex than that. We are told in the Midrash (GENESIS RABBAH 9:7) that even the *yetzer hara* has its place in the order of things. Indeed, “were it not for that [evil] impulse, a man would not build a house, marry a wife, beget children, or conduct business affairs.” In effect, the *yetzer hara* is seen as a generative force, not unlike the Greek notion of eros. The evil impulse is elsewhere compared to brass—when placed in the fire of Torah, the *yetzer hara*, like brass, can be shaped into a useful implement. In the more mystical realm of Judaism, the Zohar, we are told that the evil impulse, when overcome, allows us to show our love for God. The *yetzer hara*, in effect, may be used in the service of God:

How can a person love [God] with his evil passion? Does not the evil impulse challenge a person not to come close to God? How then can he love Him with this attribute? But this is an added love for the Holy One, praised be He, when the evil impulse is subdued because of the great love a person has for God. When the evil impulse has been overcome...this is a love for the Holy One...since a person has thereby associated the evil impulse in the service of God.¹

Another way of subduing the evil impulse is suggested in the Talmud by the School of Rabbi Ishmael (KIDDUSHIN 30b): “If the evil impulse encounters thee, drag him to the *bet ha-midrash* [house of study]...” In this

regard, we learn in Sifre Deuteronomy that God says: “My sons, I created for you the evil impulse; I created for you the Torah as an antidote.”²

Like the martial art of aikido, in which the opponent’s blow is drawn toward and then past oneself, the Talmud teaches us that the evil impulse may be redirected toward good ends. This is quite different from the early Christian view of evil, in which we are admonished, “if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire.” (MATTHEW 18:9)

To understand these differences, we need to recall the portion of Homer’s *Odyssey*, in which Odysseus, sailing by the island of the Sirens, has his men tie him to the mast of his ship. He does this so that he can hear the seductive singing of the Sirens without succumbing entirely to them, and thus destroying his ship on the rocks. In the second century CE, the Greek theologian Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-215 CE) used this tale of Homer’s to illustrate the Christian view of self-restraint. As Tarnas observes, just as Odysseus restrains himself by tying himself to the mast,

...so too could the mature Christian make his way through the sensual and intellectual enticements of the secular world and pagan culture, having full knowledge of them while tying himself to the cross—the mast of the Church—for spiritual security.³

Superficially, one could see this “bondage to the cross” as akin to the Judaic idea of curbing the *yetzer hara*. But the deep structure of the two images—drawing the evil impulse to the house of study versus tying oneself to the cross—are really quite different. The image used by Clement is one in which the individual is too weak to resist the evil at hand, and requires physical restraint. An external application of force is used (albeit at the individual’s instigation) to exorcize the evil and bind the person to righteousness.

By contrast, in Rabbi Ishmael’s image, the individual is strong enough to pull the evil impulse to the house of study, where the transformative power of Torah will do its work. And since the evil impulse really stems from one “heart” that beats within each of us, the image is actually one in which the individual brings two parts of the self together—the evil impulse, and the individual’s loyalty to the written word of God. Thus, in Judaism, resisting temptation is a kind of “fusing” process, in which divergent aspects of the self are reunited.

Even better, our task is to transform our evil impulses. Thus, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady (1745-1813)—the founder of the Habad movement of Hasidism—tells us that while the individual must first try to curb the evil impulse, the next step is to “convert the darkness to light.” Unconstrained lust “shall be redirected from its worldly disposition to yearn for God.” Every evil impulse has the potential for such transformation. Arrogance may be transformed into high assurance in the ways of God. Anger may be transmuted into vigorous social advocacy. Even the denial of God may be transformed, as Rabbi Moshe Lieb of Sasov tells us. For when the disbeliever is asked to give charity, he or she cannot fall back on the excuse, “God will take care of you!” Rather, the denial of God can lead to an increased sense of personal responsibility, and hence, to charitable acts.

The Talmud’s view of *yetzer hara*, I believe, is intimately connected with the Jewish ideal of learning from everyone. Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezeritch, tells us that we can even learn from a thief:

*From a thief, [a man] should learn: (1) to work at night; (2) if one cannot gain what one wants in one night, to try again the next night; (3) to love one’s co-workers just as thieves love each other; (4) to be willing to risk one’s life even for a little thing; (5) not to attach too much value to things, even though one has risked one’s life for them, just as a thief will resell a stolen article at a fraction of its real value; (6) to withstand all kinds of beatings and tortures but to remain what you are; (7) to believe that your work is worthwhile, and not to be willing to change it.*⁴

In effect, Dov Baer is telling us that even the thief is not worthless. There are some aspects of thievery that can be incorporated into the life of the pious individual and there transformed—just as brass may be shaped by fire. Indeed, if we utterly reject all elements of the “thief” in ourselves, we risk losing our potential for creativity and daring. Perhaps if we fend off these negative elements too fiercely, we even risk becoming the very thief we so deeply fear.

In his essay on the Seer of Lublin, Elie Wiesel tells of a hasid who complained to the Seer that he suffered from “impure, alien thoughts.” The Seer of Lublin replied, “Alien? They are not alien—they are yours.”⁵

The ancient Greeks spoke of *eudaimonism*—roughly, living in harmony with one’s inner demon. The German poet Rilke put it another

way: “If my devils are to leave me, I am afraid my angels will take flight as well.” We need a bit of our inner “thieves,” Dov Baer might say, in order to retain our inner benefactors.

“How do I combat this growing rebellion?” the young man had asked.

Was there a way in which the Talmudic concept of *yetzer hara* might inform my reply to him? Or was this a psychic battle that could not be averted? I responded that, in my view of dissociative identity disorder, the goal is to integrate the diverse aspects of the self, not to wage war upon them. In the treatment of this disorder, the therapist often tries to “introduce” one alter to another, helping these dissociated aspects of the self get on better terms with one another. In time, we hope, the more mature parts of the fragmented self may mollify and educate the more primitive parts. Perhaps the patient will even incorporate the helpful and caring aspects of the therapist into a new, more stable self. All this may take many years of treatment. By taking this integrative approach, I believe therapists are drawing on the Talmudic understanding of *yetzer hara*. But to differ a bit with I.B. Singer, I would suggest that therapy is aimed not at “binding the beast,” but at harnessing it—and even, with time, embracing it and transforming it into a creature of divine labors.

1 Ben-Zion Bokser, *The Talmud: Selected Writings*, Paulist Press, 1989, p. 126.

2 Isaac Unterman, *Pirke Aboth*. Twayne Publishers, 1964, p. 141.

3 R. Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind*, Ballantine Books, 1991, p. 152.

4 Pearl Besserman, *The Way of the Jewish Mystics*, Shambhala, 1994, p.136.

5 Elie Wiesel, *Four Hasidic Masters*, University of Notre Dame Press, 1978, p. 86.



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