

More Than Being A Blessing Lekh Lekha 5777

Earlier this week, for Lunch & Learn, I ran a session on what Judaism has to say about civil discourse. As I explained to the class at the time - it was the day before the election - I did so because we might need some wisdom to navigate the result.

And that has turned out to be the case. It was predictable that whatever the result of this closely fought race, there would be a large group of people who would feel vindicated and an almost-as-large group who would feel betrayed. As a foreigner here, as someone with no vote, someone from a very different electoral culture, I have watched as crevasses have opened in communities, in cities and across the country.

One of the ways I understand my calling to be a rabbi is to seek to bring the wisdom of our tradition to bear upon the events of our lives. And so I offer these words today in that spirit. I believe I would have offered them in much the same form if the election result had been different.

A few weeks ago we read the story of the creation of humanity. The Rabbis notice that one of the words used for creating the first human, *vayitzer*, is written with two *yuds*. The second one is not grammatically necessary, and so the Rabbis asked why it was there, and answered their own question by deciding that each *yud* represented a different fundamental drive - *yetzer* - in the human being. Rabbi Ira Stone teaches that the *yetzer hara*, the so-called 'evil impulse' (though I find that an inaccurate translation) is a worldview that is focused on you, while the *yetzer hatov* is a worldview that holds you responsible for the others in your life.

So the *yetzer hara*, concern for the self, is the kind of energy that seeks to fulfill the needs of the self above all other needs, while the *yetzer hatov*, concern for the other, enables us to reach past the self and encompass the needs of others. The Rabbis, by the way, suggest that both are necessary for us to be fully human. Famously, there is a midrash that claims, *Were it not for the yetzer ha-ra, nobody would build a house, or get married, or have children...*[Bereishit Rabba 9:7]. Without a drive for survival, for looking after ourselves, we can't continue to exist. As my havruta, Rabbi Yael Saidoff, put it this week, the *yetzer ha-ra* is our primal wiring.

And if we look at the whole process of this election through the lens of the two *yetzarim*, we can see just how much of an exercise in the *yetzer hara* it was. And I say that without reference to the strategies or declared policies of either party. I am talking about the whole process and how it was conducted:

The pundits and their purported 'opinion pieces';
The exposes and scandals, and the feasting on those scandals;
The namecalling and accusations;
The debates - with their glitz and their interruptions and their inflated rhetoric;
The streams of tweets and broadcasts and statistics and quasi-statistics;
The snide or not-so-snide categorizations of whole groups of humanity;

And most of all, we confirmed the existence, on both sides, of something that is a hallmark of the *yetzer hara* - the 'echo chamber,' the shoring up of our own opinions with others that agree with them at the expense of access to those that do not - a process that much of our social media enables, whether we are conscious of it or not.

So much of this election has played to the *yetzer ha-ra*.

Let me be clear what I am saying here. I am not saying that either candidate was a personification of the *yetzer ha-ra*. I am saying that the way the process was conducted was dominated by it, and quite possibly deliberately designed to awaken it in each of us.

And too much *yetzer ha-ra* is not good for human beings. In the aftermath of this election, a sickening ugliness has begun to manifest. There have been shouting mobs and vituperative graffiti. There have been threatening notes left on windshields, insults and catcalling, personal assaults. We are still only in the first week after the election, but already we are seeing the effects of a *yetzer ha-ra* overdose, some of the worst facets of humanity; arrogance, violence, intemperate rage.

And all this week, I have been listening to you and the wider New Orleans Jewish community. Some of you feel vindicated, triumphant, optimistic. But I have also had people in tears in my classes and in my office. I have heard about broken hopes and shattered dreams. And most of all, I have heard fear, terrible fear - of the country being 'swept away,' of being persecuted and rejected and hated, rounded up, exiled and abandoned. This is the damage this exercise in the *yetzer ha-ra* has left in its wake. This is its human cost. And the rancid taste of it is still in our mouths.

And so I ask: what can our tradition offer at this time? The Rabbis accept that a human being cannot function without the *yetzer ha-ra*, so repressing it is not an option. Instead, they teach that it must be kept in check by pouring in the *yetzer ha-tov* to act as an antidote. To remind us, the *yetzer ha-tov* is primarily the impulse that pulls us beyond our own interests and faces us outwards, towards each other.

Which brings me to this week's Torah portion. It begins with God's words to Abram:

*I will make of you a great nation,
I will bless you,
I will make your name great
And you will be a blessing.*

In his commentary, Rashi observes:

Blessings are given into your hand. Until now, they were mine, God's, to give. I blessed Adam, and I blessed Noah. But from now on, you may bless whoever you desire to bless.

And as we address the aftermath of this election and its effect, both within our community and outside of it, I want us to notice Rashi's wisdom.

Being a blessing is self-directed, and therefore vulnerable to being hijacked by the *yetzer ha-ra*. Any of us can walk in the world doing pretty much whatever we please and call it being a blessing. It's easy to tell ourselves that we are acting morally and appropriately and that what we are doing is for the greater good. And maybe it is, and maybe it isn't. But to *give* a blessing is something entirely different. Giving a blessing means that we need to consider who we are giving it to, and how it will be received. Giving a blessing means we need to face someone - whether literally or metaphorically - and ask ourselves, what does this person need right now? How are *they* feeling? What will be most helpful not for me, but for them? How can I call down for them the support and sustenance that they need?

And if we focus on *giving* blessings, rather than being blessings, we stand a chance - at least here in this community - of antidoting the latest overdose of the *yetzer ha-ra*. Perhaps we can begin to move past some of the ugliest aspects of this last period. If we take Rashi's interpretation seriously, if we place ourselves in the other's position before we speak, we will be less volatile and more considerate, less selfish and more compassionate, and better equipped to address what is unfolding.

I call on each of us to give a blessing to someone this week. I call on each of us to move beyond the *yetzer ha-ra* and to pour out the *yetzer ha-tov*, regardless of the discourse that swirls around us. And I bless all of us with the strength and the resolution to do so.

Shabbat shalom.