

Bereishit 5781 **Thing One and Thing Two**

This week I took a closer look at the word 'stress.'

Its core meaning - listed in the dictionary before the one that means 'psychological strain' - is the idea of pressure or tension being applied to something. In speech, stress is the emphasis given to a particular syllable or word in speech, typically through a combination of relatively greater loudness, higher pitch, and longer duration.

And when an object is stressed, it tends to change. The best personal example of this that I can give you is the final year of rabbinical school. As a group, each of us had lovable little habits. Under the stress of the final year - would we find jobs, where would the jobs be, had we found our rabbinical voices yet, how were we doing with being symbolic exemplars - our lovable little habits grew - I'd say, by about 25%. My havruta, who always did better after a little snooze, took more snoozes. The folk who worried about their appearance got more haircuts. The vague ones got more vague. The organized ones started carrying files sprouting more and more post-its in more and more complex arrangements. The ones who talked to themselves did it more. Myself, I started using longer and longer words in longer and longer sentences.

And right now I'm noticing a similar phenomenon. In public and in private, the lovable little aspects of ourselves that we were previously able to balance out within our lives and our personalities have become more of a 'thing.'

Often we think of our 'things' as being negative. "I'm just a worrier," we say. Or, "I'm an escapist." Or, "I've just got some really bad habits." And so on.

This morning we read the part of the Torah that talks about when human beings were created from earth. If we look at it closely, we'll see that there's a spelling mistake. The word *vayitzer* that refers to the Holy One forming the first human, is spelled with two *yuds*. For millenia our teachers have interpreted this as meaning that every human being has two *yuds* inside them - the *yetzer ha-tov* and the *yetzer ha-ra*. The *yetzer ha-tov* - often translated as 'good inclination' - is the part of us that is expansive, selfless, reaching out for the other rather than being concerned with our own interests.

The Rabbis discuss¹ whether it would be possible just to get rid of the *yetzer ha-ra*. Wouldn't it be easier if our 'things' just didn't exist in the first place? There's even a sweet story in the Talmud about it that tells us that one day the *yetzer ha-ra* fell down from heaven and fortunately was discovered in the street by a group of rabbis who recognized it immediately. They put it in a lead pot and clapped down the lid, even though it warned them that by doing so they would destroy the world. And sure enough, three days later you couldn't find a fresh egg from one end of the land of Israel to the other. In a different Midrash, Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman teaches that when the Holy One declares *tov me'od* on the sixth day of creation, this refers to the *yetzer ha-ra* because without it nobody would ever build a home, get married, have children or do business.

This year, I find myself wondering thinking about the *yetzer ha-ra* in less dramatic terms. I wonder if it manifests at a lower level in us. I wonder if it could, in fact, be our 'things.' Whatever it is: our bad habits, our anxiety, the junk that we talk to ourselves without even realizing it - all of these aspects of our selves have the flavor of the *yetzer ha-ra*. Not an evil thing, not wicked in any sense - just something that shows the limitations we are placing on ourselves and how we see the world.

And then I wonder whether it is useful to see our 'things' as our teachers. Given that we can't get rid of them if those stories are anything to go by, perhaps they are trying to tell us something.

The first thing our 'things' teach us is that they are, well, just 'things.' They aren't all there is to us. Perhaps we can recognize that these habits are changeable, because our nature is to change. Perhaps we can see ourselves in a wider perspective.

And once we do that, we learn a second lesson. We learn that just as we have our 'things,' everyone else has theirs. They are doing their best with their 'things,' just as we are doing our best with ours. And gradually we come to learn compassion - for ourselves and for each other.

And the third lesson is that when we are able to step away from seeing ourselves as defined by our 'things,' and others being defined by theirs, we unlock a huge amount of communal potential. By admitting and acknowledging the existence of the *yetzer ha-ra*, by allowing it to be our teacher and by holding ourselves and others gently, we make better connections and relationships, we grow into and alongside each other, we become kinder and less judgmental.

Stress is never fun. But perhaps the changes in us that it brings about are not so bad, after all.

¹ BT *Yoma* 69b; Bereishit Rabbah 9:7