

Grow Up and Become a Better Person!

Most of us have probably heard of the Christian dogma of the initial sin, meaning: the existence of inherited, genetically ingrained evil in human beings. People are born in sin, and that defines them.

As worded in classic Calvinist theology: "Man is wholly incapable of doing any good and inclined to all evil." Also the philosopher Kant wrote that man "is a slave of his passions and inclined to all evil".

On the other side of the spectrum, in other circles, there is a widespread concept that humans are innately good. When children are born, their souls are pure like fresh fallen snow with no concept of evil, greed or anger. But as they grow up, they become corrupted by society and infected with bad traits.

Adherents of this thought are baffled to hear the findings of research. When the rates of violence were measured over the course of people's life spans, it became clear that the most violent stage of life is... NOT later in life, when people have been longer exposed to an evil, corrupting society, NOT even at the notorious age of adolescence, but around the age of 2!!!

Experimental psychologist Steven Pinker writes: "A typical toddler [...] kicks, bites, hits, and gets into fights with peers, but after "the terrible twos" the rate of physical aggression goes steadily down over the course of childhood".

The new prevailing insight is now that children do not learn aggression; they learn not to be aggressive.

Is the Christian dogma of people being innately evil then correct? That cannot be right either, because clearly many people behave ethically in most cases and are capable of selfless acts of charity.

Noble concepts such as righteousness, fairness, kindness and benevolence are also engraved in our conscience. ... So, there must be two inborn sides to people's nature.

For 1000's of years Judaism has acknowledged and named both these sides within human beings.

Each person is born with two sides, two drives inside himself: The "Yeser ha-Tobh (a good inclination) and the Yeser ha-Ra` (a negative force).

The art of growing and evolving to a higher level is to learn –throughout our entire lives– how to deal with our negative drive and how to channel it, so it does not take hold of us.

Controlling the Yeser ha-Ra` does not make us boring softies, but it does make us worthier and happier people, more emotionally balanced, and more in control of our lives.

But it does require training and perseverance, a constant process of self-reflection and self-improvement.

That is what these last 10 days and especially Yom Kippur is all about.

No one here is perfect, and that's okay, *but* we can all become ever better and happier people; a little bit more, each day.

It is a tricky process though. This Yeser ha-Ra` is playing a trick on us. Or, not to personify our evil inclination, I should say: "We are constantly playing a trick on ourselves.

One of these tricks is: When two people do something bad to each other, even if the harm is equal, each person tends to rate his/her own action as not-so-bad, understandable-under-the-circumstances, excusable, but the other person's action is perceived as much worse than their own. It is extremely hard for people to actually recognize their mistakes.

The psychologist Baumeister, who studied numerous perpetrators of destructive acts, from rather innocent to very severe ones, found that no one thought that they had done anything wrong.

In our widduy -our confession- we pray: *Ashamnu, Baghadnu, Gazalnu* (we sinned, we cheated, we stole... etc.) Only on a rare occasion do we say: *Ashamti, Baghadti, Ganavti* (I... sinned, I cheated, I stole...)

Of course it is for a good reason the prayers are formulated the way they are! It is very important that we are not just concerned about our *own* soul's growth, our *own* self-improvement, but about the conduct and destiny of the entire Jewish people. We should feel responsible for each other.

So we also need to look critically at what happens within the Jewish world at large, and be bothered if there is wrongdoing or hypocrisy.

That is why *not* looking critically at our Jewish communities or (let's say) at Israeli society is not the answer. Whenever there is wrongdoing, we should see it, and we should feel upset *because* of it, and look for ways of improvement.

But, having said that, the *hardest* part is to acknowledge and confess (not aloud, in silence): *I* did such-and-such wrong, I am sorry about it, I hate that I did it, and I decide not to ever do this again. From now on, this is not part of my life style any more.

Remember! Children learn to control their primal impulses when they grow up. This process does not have to stop with adulthood. We can *keep* growing spiritually and become better people. If only we can recognize where our flaws are, and make a conscious decision to change.

In these last moments of the Day of Atonement, let us all renew our dedication to God –Who is the ultimate Inspirer of all that is good– and our resolution to be the best person we can be (which is God-willing better than last year), so we will improve ourselves, and strengthen and inspire our communities and the people around us to reach higher levels.