

One Person / Two Souls Randi Wren

The Jewish High Holy days are a time of introspection. In preparation for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we are all asked to do some earnest soul searching — to think about who we are and how we act. How do we become better people next year? “The Torah’s commandments were not given to humankind for any purpose other than to refine people” (Genesis Rabbah 44:1).

In the 2,500 year history of Jewish texts, I am aware of no normative statement asserting that human beings are wholly or fundamentally good. According to our tradition, we are a mixed bag. And there are many statements that acknowledge this. Ecclesiastes captures the Jewish position when he says, “There is no man so righteous who does only good and never sins.”

A midrash tells us that the angel in charge of conception takes a drop of semen, places it before the Almighty and inquires: Master of the Universe what is the fate of this drop? Will it become strong or weak? Wise or foolish? Wealthy or poor? However, the question of righteousness or wickedness is not posed by the angel, nor determined by the Almighty. It is written that, "Everything is

in the hands of heaven, except for the fear of heaven." When choosing between good and evil, a person retains absolute freedom at all times. There is nothing that pre-determines our righteousness or our wickedness.

The purpose of Judaism is to lead us toward righteousness, to encourage the virtuous, to produce good people—all in a world where it is often very difficult to pursue the good. Following an ethically Jewish way of life is not an easy choice. It is a difficult commitment. One result of this choice has been our focus on repairing and improving the world, on *tikkun olam*. I see this as repairing our personal world — that is aspects of our personal relationships — as well as attending to the larger challenges facing the world that we share. We *all* share the responsibility for *tikkun olam*. But how do we know what path to follow?

Judaism has a sophisticated view of human nature. We are not born good, but we are certainly born with the possibility of becoming good. According to our tradition, human beings have, on the one hand, a conscience and a will or inclination to do good—the *yetzer tov*, and, on the other hand, an unbridled urge or inclination—the *yetzer rah*, which, left unchecked, leads us to evil. And, according to the Jewish tradition, these two inclinations, found within each of

us, are at war with one another. Our task, throughout life, is to strengthen the power of — to cultivate — the *yetzer tov*, the good inclination.

The importance, complexity and sheer number of Jewish laws demonstrates that our tradition is suspicious of human nature left undisciplined. While the tradition wants us to cultivate the *yetzer tov*, the good inclination — it wants us to control the *yetzer rah*, the evil or unbridled inclination. If we believe that people are born good, why stress character development in raising our children? Why teach values? This understanding of human nature is so important. If we believe that people are born good — that it is human nature to be good — then we will not teach goodness. Why teach what we already naturally possess? The primary struggle we must wage, in order to create a better world, is within our own nature. Goodness — godliness — must be coached and encouraged. And the hassidic masters knew this.

Similar to our *yezers* or inclinations, the hassidic masters speak of two distinct souls that vitalize and animate the human being: an Animalistic Soul and a Godly Soul. The human being is created in God's image, but he is also an animal. And acting like an animal is

natural. For example we say someone "eats like a pig" or we compare a person who has many sexual partners to a rabbit. (It is no accident that Hugh Hefner chose the bunny to represent his brand.) And this is why there are so many mitzvot governing the human activities that are most animal-like: eating and sexual relations. Instead of denying or denigrating these behaviors, Judaism attempts to sanctify, to uplift, them through the mitzvot. We can eat or engage in sexual relations just as animals do or we can elevate our behavior. While acting like an animal might be easy, acting God-like must be cultivated and controlled.

Animals are not evil, but the animal nature is neither holy nor divine. A strong dog will not share his meal with a homeless, starving dog. The dog is not being evil. A rabbit will have intercourse with every other rabbit it encounters—without a thought of love or intimacy—but not out of evil. When a cat plays with a mouse until the mouse dies, the cat is not doing this in order to be evil.

The animal soul, the *nefesh habehamit*, is the source of our self-serving — but not evil — drives. It is the source of our urge for food or for sex. The animal soul naturally gravitates toward the pleasurable and gratifying. As physical beings our default

pleasures are physical — and often of the forbidden variety. The animal soul is the source of our self-centered passions and it is necessary for our lives. It fuels the motor of human existence.

The hassidic masters taught that the human being's *yetzer ra* or evil inclination emerges from our animal soul. It is our drive to evil.

While the *yetzer ra* must be destroyed or at least ignored, since it is intrinsically evil, the animal soul — our raw passion — needs to be re-formed, re-channeled, redirected.

The book Opening the Tanya, by Rabbi Adin Steinzaltz, is a translation and commentary on the first twelve chapters of the Tanya, one of the formative books of Hassidism, written by the first Lubavitcher Rebbe, Schneur Zalman. An original approach to theology and human psychology, the Tanya employs the principles of Chabad Hasidism to reveal the nature of humanity and the root causes of human failings. The Tanya explains a mystical and mindful approach to Jewish life, describing the tension and the ongoing struggle between the two components of the human soul: the animal and the divine.

The Tanya describes different sorts of people and the *beinoni*, the intermediate one, represents the vast majority of human beings,

who still possess an animal soul that desires evil. But the *beinoni* can succeed in restraining himself from sin — in action, speech, and even in thought. This, however, is an ongoing struggle. It is a struggle that is not simply the confrontation between good and evil, but rather the encounter between a person's two souls — the soul that draws downward toward the earth, and the soul that aspires upward to Ha-Shem. Tanya teaches that every Jew possesses these two souls. The differences among us are a result of how these souls manifest themselves and which soul predominates — which soul finds *greatest* expression in a person's consciousness and behavior.

Most people fall into the category of *beinoni*. We exist in a state of tension between our two souls. At times acting from our animal nature and at times from our divine nature. Whether conscious of it or not, we are engaged in a constant struggle between our souls. The struggle is an inescapable part of human nature. We must fight our unchecked appetites: greed, lust, jealousy, sadism, cruelty. A person's task is to train the animal soul, to elevate it to a higher level of awareness and understanding, and to bring it closer to the godly soul. The beauty of being *beinoni* is recognizing both natures, both souls, and achieving goodness. This is our

fundamental task on Earth: our job is to engage in this struggle for goodness. It is what we are here to do.

In the second story of creation, in the Book of Genesis, the Hebrew word used when God creates Adam is *vayyitzer*, which has the root *yud, tsaddi, resh*, meaning to form. This, of course, is also the root of the word *yetzer*, our inclination or drive. *Vayitzer* is also the word used when God creates the animals. But there is something odd. The smallest difference in the spelling of the word when Adam is created: a *yud*, an extra *yud* in *vayyitzer* describes the creation of Adam. And according to the rabbis, no letter of Torah is "extra." Nothing in Torah is superfluous. Every *yud* is present to be interpreted; it is an *opportunity* for interpretation — an opening for greater understanding. The rabbis taught that the two *yuds* used to describe the creation of Adam indicate the two forces at work within our nature, the animal *and* the godly.

In addition to our two *yuds*, our dual nature, another duality is present in the second story of creation. While both animals and human beings are called *nefesh chaya*, a living being or soul. Only humans were given the soul of life, the *nishmat chayyim*. The animals were not given the *nishmat chayyim*, the soul that God

blew into Adam's nostrils. This soulful breath, this second soul — God's breath and His gift — was reserved for humanity.

G-d decrees that a baby is born with certain qualities: either wise or foolish, strong or weak, curious or dull. However, whether a child will follow the ways of goodness — of godliness — G-d does not determine, but gives us the breath with which to seek it.