

Good, Evil and Freewill in Judaism

One of the key differences between Judaism and Christianity is the religions' attitudes on good and evil. In contrast with other religions, Judaism does not hold that we are born sinful. Specifically, we do not hold that the unfortunate incident in the Garden of Eden resulted in any kind of Original Sin that stains humankind. In fact, the episode of Adam and Eve's eating of the forbidden fruit is never called a sin in the Torah and is never referred to by the prophets as a sin. One of our daily prayers, *Elohai Neshamah*, so beautifully chanted by Karen on Shabbat mornings, says it clearly: "The soul that you have given me, my God, is pure."

So how does Judaism account for our sometimes misbehaving nature. Simply put, our tradition teaches that we have two impulses, a *Yetzer Tov*, an impulse to do good, and a *Yetzer HaRah*, the impulse to do evil and that these two impulses are at war with each other. The goal of religion and of Judaism is to help us control the *Yetzer HaRah* so that we may better focus our energies on doing God's work. Significantly, it is not the intent to eliminate this impulse; in fact there is a wonderful and ancient rabbinic story in which the rabbis succeed in capturing the *Yetzer HaRah*. The result is that everyone loses their ambition and their desires and thus no new projects are undertaken and no new babies are born. Sadly, the rabbis conclude that both impulses are necessary and they release this impulse.

Judaism also understands *sin* differently than does Christianity. In our tradition, sin is understood as an action (a Hebrew term for sin, *chet*, is taken from archery and means "to miss the mark") against Jewish law and something that we can and should try to undo and atone for. Importantly, it is not something that stains our souls and condemns us to eternal punishment. We believe that all of us have sins and good deeds on our records, and that, in the end, God is a most merciful judge.

Judaism's bottom line is that you have the freewill to control your actions. If you sin, you can't blame it on the Devil (ala Flip Wilson) or even on Adam and Eve. May your atonement over the High Holy Days help you tame your *Yetzer HaRah* and help lead you to continuing your important work in making the world a better place.