

Ki Hinei Kachomeir: desiring our yeitzer.

**Given at Temple Emanu-El of Haverhill, MA, on Kol
Nidrei of 5779/2018**

In this anonymous twelfth-century piyyut, the paytan (poet) expands on a verse from Jeremiah, God's voice saying "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in My hand, O House of Israel" (18:6). In our annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Gospel Shabbat service, we've several times sung a gospel answer to this verse: "Use Me Lord." ("Mold me and make me to be just what You'd have me be, O let me be Your instrument, Lord use me")

But we have this Yeitzer, to which we ask God not to "turn." *Al teifan laYeitzer*. The word "Yeitzer" means "desire" or "impulse." It first pops up in Deuteronomy (31:21), on its own, with no qualifiers: God knows our Yeitzer. Later rabbinic gave this word two twinned aspects: Yeitzer HaRa, the evil impulse, which is with us from birth, and Yeitzer HaTov, the impulse towards good, which we acquire with the onset of puberty (and self-awareness). The evil Yeitzer, Yeitzer HaRa, comes from Satan and the Angel of Death (R. Shim'on ben Lakish, *Baba Bathra*, 6a). It's a tempter and seducer, identified with vanity and lust. (Shechter p. 248) However, it's also recognized as our motivation to create the lives that we want to live. Without it, teaches the midrash (rabbinic expansion) of B'reishit Rabba (9:7), "a man

would neither build a house, nor marry a wife, nor beget children, nor engage in commerce.” Yeitzer is the **creative** impulse in all of us.

In the summer of 2009, I apprenticed to the master woodworker at a folk art guild in upstate New York. That summer, I learned how to turn and shape wood on a lathe. A lathe is a terrifying machine. It is huge and complicated and clanking and moves heavy iron and wood at tremendous speeds. We apprentices learned quickly to respect the lathe. We learned how to choose and mount our “blanks” of wood, and at what angle to manipulate the sharp chisels so that they didn’t catch in the blank and yank us towards the lathe, or go flying. The first thing we learned how to make was a French rolling pin, with a continuous curve. It’s really good for pastry. I used a cherrywood blank; I held my breath every time I started the lathe, afraid of its power and my ignorance, afraid of its impersonal ability to injure me if I stood too close, or too far off. But by the end of a week, I had a beautiful rolling pin, one I use to this day.

A lathe, used carelessly, can be deadly. But when it’s used with attention and love, it can create beauty out of rough hunks of wood. In our piyyut, God is the artisan and we are the material out of which God creates a tool or a work of art. But the Yeitzer, which we plead with God to disregard, is also itself a tool, which can be used for good or for evil. **Our will is what makes the**

difference. Rabbi Solomon Schechter teaches (in *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology*, p. 270), that “The difference between the wicked and the righteous is that the wicked are in the power of their hearts, while the righteous have the heart in their power.” On Yom Kippur, we work to subdue our Yeitzer haRa, our evil impulse. We fast from food and intimate relations, to practice resisting its temptation. We contemplate death, to put our own desires into the perspective of eternity. We pray fervently; we study the Torah. All of these, according to the Talmud (Bavli, B’rachot 5a), are weapons against the Yeitzer HaRa. But we’re conscious that the Yeitzer in us also gives us the ability to live full, free lives, and to choose our own behaviour. This is a precious freedom that God will not limit, even for the sake of removing evil from the world.

So while we ask God not to turn to the Yeitzer [HaRa] while weighing our actions and souls, we don’t ask God to wipe it out from us. We recognize that desire, even desire we call “bad,” is necessary to life. As Rabbi Allan Lew (z”l) writes, “If we try to push these desires down, they’ll only come up somewhere else. If we kill them off altogether, we may be doing violence to ourselves; we may be killing off the basis of our real creativity.” (*This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared*, p. 91) The potter fashioning clay, the blacksmith at their forge, the turner at their lathe, all harness an ambivalent and awe-inspiring process. Out

of it, they create something beautiful and worthwhile. So too, we pray that we can emulate God in this way. This year, may we be both wood and lathe, both clay and potter. The power to create can be a wild, terrifying thing to engage with. But we all have that ability, and the responsibility to turn it to good ends, for ourselves and the world.

Ki Hinei Kachomeir is on page 450 in your machzors, and the transliteration is on page 8 in your supplement. Let's sing it together.