

***Yetzer ha-ra* (Evil Impulse) and Mimetic Desire**

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A few years ago I followed a course on the rabbinic concept *yetzer ha-ra* 'evil impulse', in a former Dutch synagogue, and during the hours spent in classroom it occurred to me that this issue could be better comprehended with insights of mimetic theory. I am not an expert on evil impulse, nor a theologian, a priest or a rabbi, but a linguist, interested in the semantics of good and evil.

In my personal life, raised in the catholic tradition, struggling with the problems of body, mind & the Holy Ghost, I lost my faith during the seventies, but after a shake-up of my highly modern beliefs and values, partly thanks to the work of our *maître* Girard, I took interest in religion, started learning Hebrew, got involved in Talmudica - and learned that the tension between the good and bad impulse makes life full of risks...

The main question in my presentation today is if the notion *yetzer ha-ra* is fruitful in understanding mimetic desire.

According to rabbinic literature, within man there are two inclinations: a good one and an evil one. Free will gives us the power to choose between them. The good inclination urges man to the selfless service of God and his fellow man. The evil impulse, by contrast, is an aspect of human nature rife with chaotic and destructive possibilities. It represents man's drive for sexual fun, possessions, power, fighting and the worship of idols. In Jewish tradition these concepts are called *yetzer tov* and *yetzer ha-ra*, *tov* being 'good' and *ra* 'evil, bad'.

Solomon Schechter, in his *Aspects of rabbinic theology*, writes that the term *yetzer* is obscure and variously used. The Hebrew noun *yetzer* derives from a root Y-TZ-R, meaning 'to form, frame or fashion'. However, when used with reference to the mind, it may mean 'imagination', 'device', 'purpose', 'drive', 'urge' 'inclination' or 'desire'. The significant point, as observed by Erich Fromm in his book *You shall be as gods*, is that the Hebrew word indicates the important fact that evil (or good) inclinations are possible only on the basis of something that is specifically human: imagination. For this very reason, only man – and not animals – can be evil or good. An animal can act in a manner which appears to us as cruel (a cat playing with a mouse), but here is no evil in this play, since it is nothing but the manifestation of the animal's instinct.

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The basis to the idea of the existence in man's nature of *yetzer* is to be found in the Bible. Of course. The term was probably suggested in the story of Noach, where, in Genesis 6: 5, the noun *yetzer* is followed by the predicate *ra*. "The LORD saw how great was man's wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by his mind was evil all the time." This is the recent translation of the Jewish Study Bible, the Revised English Bible translates "how their every thought and inclination were always wicked", the King James renders "every imagination."

Deuteronomy 31: 21 is another case. After predicting that Israel will turn to strange gods and worship them, and provoke God to break his covenant, Scripture proceeds to say: "For I know his *yetzer*." The more conspicuous figure of the two *yetzers* is that of the evil impulse, *yetzer ha-ra*, the expression 'good impulse' is a creation of a later date.

Various midrashim discuss the references in the texts that gave rise to the impulses. In *Bereshit Rabba* we find a remarkable saying on Genesis 1:31, when God looked upon the finished creation, and saw all that he had made, "and behold it was very good" (*tov me'od*). In the preceding verses on the creation it was just good – which refers to *yetzer tov*. **Very good** refers to the *yetzer ha-ra*. Is the evil inclination, then, very good?

I'll return to this point later, but first another key text in the Talmudic discussions on the impulses: Genesis. 2:7, the second creation story: "The LORD God *formed* man from the dust of the earth." *Formed* is the translation of Hebrew *vayyitzer*, with the anomalous spelling of the double *yud*. According to the rabbis, to whom no anomaly is without meaning, in this verse the double *yud* refers to the double inclination, the one *yud* standing for *yetzer tov* 'good impulse' the second for *yetzer ha-ra*.

And then: much quoted from *Deuteronomy*, chapter 6: 5, just after the *Shema*: "and you must love the Lord with all your heart." Instead of Hebrew *lev*, which means 'heart', the text renders *levav* with a double beth, so literally *bechol-levavcha* means 'with all your hearts'. The medieval commentator Rashi, referring to a midrash on Deuteronomy (*Sifree*), remarks: this means "with both the good inclination and evil inclination."

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A further exploration of the semantic field shows that the seat of both the evil and the good *yetzer* is in the heart, that is: the mind and will. The duality of impulses does not correspond to the Hellenistic duality of man's natural constitution, with the bad impulse residing in the flesh while the good impulse proceeds from the soul. That idea has no real counterpart in rabbinic thinking. And *yetzer ha-ra* is also different from original sin, which is a fall from something good. Concerning the *yetzer ha-ra*, it assaults a person everyday and prevents him from doing whatever he is supposed to do in this world. The *yetzer ha-ra* can blind us. The names applied to it are various and indicative of both its nature and function. Some rabbis personify the inclination and claim that Satan, *yetzer ha-ra*, and the angel of death are one. It is said that Moses called him the *uncircumcised*, David the *unclean*, Salomon the *enemy*, the prophet Isaiah *the stumbling block*, Ezekiel the *stone*, and Joel *the hidden one in the heart of man*. His role as accuser is described in other places.

Should we get rid of the evil desire? Certainly not, for it is a necessary force in God's creation and it is only when it gets out of hand that it becomes the cause of harm. The rabbinic formulation has proven to be somewhat problematic when taken too literally because of its use of the moral terms 'good' and 'evil' to characterize the essentially naturally and therefore morally neutral inclinations that tend to pull the individual simultaneously in different directions. But "without the *yetzer ha-ra* no man would build a house, take a wife and beget children" (Midrash Rabbah, *Bereshit* IX, 7). The *yetzer* is only evil because it easily leads man astray and dominates him, like yeast in dough or like a guest who eventually takes over a

host. For instance, Maimonides categorically rejected the notion that 'evil' has the objectively autonomous existence for an inclination to be intrinsically bad. The idea behind this is that evil has power only when it is seen as disconnected from God.

A story, to illustrate. Once, in an effort to destroy the *yetzer ha-ra*, the Sages of the Great Assembly ordered a complete fast of three days, whereupon the *yetzer* was surrendered to them. He came forth from the Holy of Holies as a lion of fire. At that moment the prophet declared, "This is the Yetzer, cast him in a lead [led] barrel." The *yetzer* said to them, "Realize that if you kill me, the world is finished." They held him for three days. And then: a fresh egg was needed for a sick person, but it could not be found in the whole land of Israel. So they asked, "What shall we do now?" - They pulled out his eyes and let him go; this helped in that men became less inclined to incest. The lesson is: we see evil in ourselves, it offends us, and we think the right thing to do is to totally purge ourselves of it. Yet we don't truly understand it, for things we so easily characterize as "evil" actually spring out of the very nexus of life.

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How is this traditional rabbinic wisdom to be comprehended within the framework of mimetic theory? And the other way round: can the *yetzer* issues contribute to the theory? In my opinion a strong point in the 'mimetic enterprise' is that it enables us to reassess insights, for long considered out of date. In broad terms the concept of *yetzer* 'prefigures' mimetic desire: both are specifically human and function within culture. And there is a parallel between *yetzers tov / ha-ra* and good and bad mimesis. In *Celui par qui le scandal arrive* Girard explained that 'Satan' and 'stumbling block' (names used for the *yetzer ha-ra*) refer to mimetic rivalry.

Although traditional *yetzer* discussions are formulated in pre-scientific terms, implicitly the rabbis point at the view that desire is conditioned by our imitative human nature. Aryeh Kaplan, in his *Jewish Meditation*, retells the story of a rabbi who once woke up on a cold winter morning to say his prayers. The Evil Urge said to him: 'How can you get up so early? You are already an old man, and it's so cold outside.' The Rabbi replied to the Evil Urge, 'You are a lot older than me, and you're up already.' This illustrates, Kaplan writes, the concept of emulating evil rather than succumbing to it. In other words: mimetic rivalry.

This is an interesting point, I think: that the remedy for the *yetzer ha-ra* consists in mimetic rivalry, which can be good. A quote from *Qohelet*: "Again I considered all labour and all excelling in work: that it is a man's rivalry with his neighbour." To which was added: since business and trade depend upon competition and rivalry, which, in turn, depend upon the instigations of the *yetzer ha-ra*, it may be said that the *yetzer* is good.

In *Les origines de la culture* Girard writes that the only freedom to choose we have, is to imitate Jesus, who in turn, imitates the Father: it is part of an endless chain of good imitation, non-rivalrous – and the saints are links of this chain. But in my view Jesus himself was constantly involved in challenge and rivalry, playing with it in discussions or (sort of) riddle sessions with the Pharisees, and with the devil during the temptation in the desert the gospels describe. Reading the cases Jean-Michel Oughourlian's presented in his introduction to

Génèse du désir, I discovered the same pattern: rivalry to overcome rivalry – a paradoxical strategy, based on symmetry, and often with a good sense of humour.

Without mimetic desire and rivalry, life itself would slowly wither away – a sad thing. So the goal of the spiritual person is not to destroy the selfish-sexual-evil impulse, but rather to sublimate it to God's purpose. We need to learn to bend *both* our impulses to godly ends. And should not cease to lust, but should direct that urge toward love. We should turn our impulse toward vengeance into the desire for justice, our ambition for acquiring possessions into the creation of wealth that will "float every boat," as economists like to say. - It's almost the same with so called *bad* and *good* mimesis.

Jewish tradition has different remedies or antidotes for overcoming the *yetzer ha-ra*; the most important being the daily study of Torah: an exercise in good and fruitful imagination. One of the meanings of Torah itself is 'teaching', and the Torah teaches that learning is the most important mode of life, more important than praying. The Talmud states: "If God has created the *evil yetzer*, he also created the Torah as a remedy against him." And: "My son, if the evil impulse meets you, drag him into the schoolhouse (*beth-hammidrash*).". Other remedies, which also apply to mimetic desire are works of loving-kindness, the contemplation of death, some ascetic exercises and praying. Concerning the latter: with the mimetic understanding of the social component in human desire we discover the value of prayers in overcoming the *yetzer ha-ra*. This became clear to me in a paper by James Alison, written for a seminar in Brazil. "The urgent reason why we need to pray is to allow the 'One who knows what is good for us' – unlike we ourselves [and] unlike the social other and its violent traps, to gain access to re-creating us from within, to giving us a "self", an "I of desire". -- We are asking, in fact to become a symptom of his pattern of desire, rather than that of the other which ties us up into becoming so much less."

It remembered me a teaching by the famous chassidic Rabbi Susha: "After I die, God will not ask me: "Susha, why were you not like Avraham or Moshe"? Rather He will ask me: "Susha, why were you not Susha"? Meaning, each of us should try to discover and use his own potential for the good. Which presupposes 'moments of grace'. Simply put, I think that's what 'identity' is all about - and the purpose of the evil inclination is to tempt us and to allow us to have free choice. And let us not forget the real truth: the greater a person is & the higher one's level of piety - the stronger his *yetzer ha-ra*.

Thank you.

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BIO

Michael Elias is a Dutch linguist, who carried out field work on the urban dialect of The Hague. He taught communication studies at Rotterdam University and sociolinguistics at the Faculty of Letters of VU University (Amsterdam). Since twenty years he directs *Lexis language agency*. His publications bear upon literacy, applied linguistics and [*taboos in contemporary speech*](#). He wrote a Ph. Dissertation on [*Neck-riddles*](#) (Utrecht University) in relation to mimetic theory. At the VU Blaise Pascal Institute, he was secretary of the *Studiekring René Girard* (1994-2004), member of the steering committee for COV&R 2007, and since 2004 editor of www.girard.nl.