

Taking an Account of Ourselves: Mussar for Rosh Hashanah

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What is Mussar? (From [My Jewish Learning](#) article)

Why is it hard to be good? It is a question Jewish thinkers have been asking for more than 1,000 years. While the commandments in the Torah and other Jewish texts are laid out pretty clearly, people often have a hard time following them. *Mussar* (also spelled *Musar*), a Jewish spiritual practice that gives concrete instructions on how to live a meaningful and ethical life, arose as a response to this concern. *Mussar* is virtue-based ethics — based on the idea that by cultivating inner virtues, we improve ourselves. This is in contrast to most Jewish ethical teachings, which are rule-based. Today, a number of people who do not follow traditional Jewish rules and rituals are attracted to *Mussar* because it offers opportunities for personal transformation through a Jewish lens.

Mussar masters recognized that simply learning about kindness does not make us more kind. Moreover, they understood that our inner drives, wounds and appetites often manifest as the *Yetzer Hara* (the Evil Inclination), actively preventing us from behaving as we know we should. One *Mussar* teacher, Rabbi Elya Lopian (1876-1970), described *Mussar* as “teaching the heart what the mind already understands.”

During the lead up to the High Holy Days, it is not uncommon for people to reflect on their positive and negative qualities, a project known as *cheshbon ha-nefesh* (accounting of one’s soul). It can be hard to look at the ways that we have failed ourselves and others, so the question becomes, how can we look at ways to be compassionate to ourselves and others as we engage in the process of *teshuvah* (repentance/returning)? This source sheet

offers an opportunity to reflect on *yetzer ha-tov* and *yetzer ha-ra*, typically translated as the good and evil inclinations with hopes of challenging the traditional understanding of these.

Talmud Yoma 69b

<p>[The Ancient Sages] ordered a fast of three days and three nights, whereupon [The Yetzer HaRa] was surrendered to them. [The Yetzer HaRa] came forth from the Holy of Holies like a young fiery lion. [One of the rabbis] said to them: Realize that if you kill him, the world goes down. They imprisoned him for three days, then looked in the whole land of Israel for a fresh egg and could not find it. Thereupon they said: What shall we do now? Shall we kill him? The world would then go down. Shall we beg for half-mercy? They do not grant 'halves' in heaven. They put out his eyes and let him go.</p>	<p>אותיבו בתעניתא תלתא יומין ותלתא לילואתא מסרוהו ניהליהו נפק אתא כי גוריא דנורא מבית קדשי הקדשים ... אמר להו חזו דאי קטליתו ליה לההוא כליא עלמא חבשוהו תלתא יומי ובעו ביעתא בת יומא בכל ארץ ישראל ולא אשתכח אמרי היכי נעביד נקטליה כליא עלמא ניבעי רחמי אפלגא פלגא ברקיעא לא יהבי כחלינהו לעיניה ושבקהו ואהני דלא מיגרי ביה לאיניש בקריבתה</p>
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The word יצר (yetzer) is connected to the word יצירה (yetzirah) that means creation. The rabbis see procreation and continuity itself as being part of yetzer ha-ra, therefore, it can't truly be evil.

What is it for you?

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter (the father of modern day *Mussar*) taught that there are several stages of spiritual growth:

- 1) *Hergesh* (sensitivity) → becoming aware of something inside of ourselves that we need to shift
- 2) *Kibbush hayetzer* (conquering our inclination) → doing our best to calibrate ourselves so that we can shift when we feel ourselves pulled to act in a way that we do not want to
- 3) *Tikkun* → repair

Rabbi David Jaffe applies this to *yetzer ha-ra* & *yetzer ha-tov*:

Hergesh: In order to begin directing our Yetzer Harah, we need to become aware of how our inclination works, so we need to be aware of our feelings, thoughts, triggers, and motivations, we need to be sensitive to our own emotions. What triggers us and why? We need to look for little moments of when we are feeling vulnerable and get triggered. This means slowing down to notice our feelings.

Kibbush: Once we are able to notice our vulnerabilities and triggers, we can make a conscious decision whether to follow our inclinations. When something comes up, we use self-restraint, which is not an easy task always, to make a decision that lines up with what we know as the right thing to do rather than the decision that will fulfill the urges of our yetzer. This is about self-restraint in the face of the desire for some kind of instant gratification.

Tikkun: This is about using our desires and urges for the good. Unlike the Kibbush, it doesn't involve saying no, but instead it's about putting that same inclination in the service of something productive. The classic rabbinic example is the person with a murderous instinct becomes a kosher butcher. Or someone who loves competition and winning competes with themselves to do more and more acts of Hesed or loving-kindness.

Mary Oliver, “Wild Geese”

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting -
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

- How does this poem invite us to have compassion for ourselves and others?
- How can you encourage yourself to be compassionate towards yourself as you reflect during the High Holidays?

Reflection Activity: *Yetzer Ha-Ra* & *Yetzer Ha-Tov*

Identifying our “evil” and “good” inclinations

	<i>Yetzer Ha-Ra</i>	<i>Yetzer Ha-Tov</i>
How would you name these forces within yourself?		
How do these inclinations manifest in your daily life?		
What is a concrete, poignant moment attached to one of these forces?		

What is one aspect of your Yetzer Ha-Ra?

How does this impact your life as a whole?

What was a formative moment in your life where you may have developed or “caught” this?

What, if any, system of oppression does this yetzer ha-ra stem from? In other words, what/who has taught you to vilify this part of yourself?

What is the underlying human need that your yetzer ha-ra may be drawing you closer to?

How, if at all, could this aspect of you serve you in creating a more whole world and self?