

YOU MAY RULE OVER IT

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D. & Magidah Khulda bat Sarah

There's a verse in the Torah that reads: "If you do good, shall it not be lifted up? And if you do not do good, sin reposes at the door; and to you is its desire—but you may rule over it." (Genesis 4:7)

Regarding the words, "If you do good": We always have the choice to widen or narrow the distance between God and ourselves. The Divine Image—the spark of our inclination to do good, implanted within us by our Creator—may be nurtured or neglected. Up to a certain age that nurture or neglect can be laid at the doorstep of our parents. But beyond childhood it becomes our responsibility and that of the community in which we are members, if in fact we are members of an authentic community.

Judaism teaches that one good deed leads to another, as does one bad deed. (Pirke Avot 4:2) Sometimes, for instance, we become annoyed or angry when we're held to account for the consequences of our misbehavior or for ignoring the well being of those around us. To assuage our feelings of estrangement from God and goodness, we may be tempted to choose greater alienation rather than atonement.

But, "If you do good, shall it not be lifted up?" "Lifted up" refers here to how the sacrifice was lifted up to God in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem. Malbim (Rabbi Meir Lob ben Jehiel Michael, 1809-1879) teaches us that, our "sacrifice" in modern times is the free-will gift that is lifted up to God when we choose to do good, which is what allows us to be "truly free." If we act with kindness and justice toward others, we free ourselves from the guilt, damaged self-esteem, and diminished self-confidence that usually accompany estrangement from God.

Regarding the words, "And if you do not do good": The weight of the wrongdoing that we carry

limits our freedom to live fully, decimating our spirit and energy. Sometimes we consciously know we're carrying that weight and we acutely feel its oppressive burden. But sometimes we carry the weight unconsciously, aware of it only as a vague deadening of the spirit, an elusive feeling of emptiness or enervation.

For instance, there was a time in Rabbi Moshe's life when, as a youngster, he was stealing, without rationalization or self-deception. He knew what he was doing—he was a thief, and he felt like one. When occasionally caught, he was ashamed and embarrassed. Later his stealing became more sophisticated—rationalized, one might say. He was making copies of copyrighted computer software and audio and videotapes, stealing the livelihood of their authors. The burden on his conscience was subtler; the spiritual oppression was fogged by self-deception, but nonetheless burdensome. Exposure was not the same threat, because so many others were doing the same thing—but the tapes and disks were constant reminders to his conscience that he was still stealing.

Today he occasionally still steals, but typically it is someone's time that he has wasted—which, of course, may be that person's most valuable possession. His conscience is less tolerant of stealing than ever; the struggle with his *yetzer hara* or evil inclination has shifted to a higher, more nuanced level.

Regardless of what he has stolen, there has always been a spiritual price for choosing at any moment to allow the evil inclination to direct his behavior.

If we do not exert the will that God has given us to change our course once we have failed to do right, we will most certainly do greater wrongs to others and ourselves. Moral equilibrium is fictive; we are either raising ourselves up or degrading

ourselves. Once we waylay ourselves from the right path, we are ever more likely to move further away, for such is the working of the evil inclination.

Regarding the words, “Sin reposes at the door”: It does not lurk, “lying in wait” to attack us at a moment of weakness. Our tradition disallows rationalizations such as “the devil made me do it.” Au contraire, as Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) notes, “. . . [Sin] remains quietly behind your door. It does not come in to you by itself, uninvited . . . you must in the first instance invite it in, set a chair for it at your table. . . . All its desire is that you should master it and direct it.”

Regarding the words, “But you may rule over it”: Judaism teaches that we are given our senses not that they should master and direct us, but that we should master and direct them to a higher purpose. Whether our senses lead us to crave food, shelter, or sex, Judaism teaches that they are not to be suppressed as evil, but regulated. We are to rule over them and direct them in the image of God.

Suppose we are stealing other people’s property or their rights or their time or their reputation—or doing anything else that estranges us from them, from God, and from the Divine Image that God has implanted within us. What can we do to change the course of our lives? How can we “rule over it”?

Certainly we must have a desire for freedom from oppression of the spirit within us. We must want more than a life dedicated to satisfying our sensory and material appetites. We must be prepared to draw upon the Divine Image within us to create an image of ourselves that we seek to fulfill. As Nehama Leibowitz (1905-1997), one of our great modern biblical commentators, has said, our “spiritual salvation lies fully within.”

But how do we reconstruct ourselves in the Divine Image? At bottom may be the question, how shall I find within myself the resources to do what has, until this moment, seemed impossible to me?

We can choose to invest in and benefit from a congregational community that shares responsibility for uplifting and sustaining the Divine Image in each and every one of its members. We need not struggle alone with our *yetzer hara*.

It is our choice, then, whether we will “rule over it,” mastering our evil inclination, or whether it will rule over us. It is our decision whether to remain alone and vulnerable to our evil inclination or, instead, to gather and strengthen ourselves as members of a congregation, counted among the many who seek with others to lift up our congregational community and, by combining our spiritual resources in that community, to lift ourselves up.

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