Harnessing the Dark

I have been struck in the last number of weeks by villainy. Being an avid sports watcher, the NBA and NHL playoffs have been of great interest to me as they each near their championship rounds. One of the things that happens almost every year with the successful teams is a rise of a particular player that proudly wears the role of team villain. Different from the team pest that gets under the skin of the opposing team, the villain is the player who most successfully embraces their dark side, their most vicious attributes, skirting the line between permitted and prohibited to carry their team through sheer will, aggression, and any other looked down upon attribute: targeting the other team's weak link? Good choice. Taunting the other team's celebration? Strategic.

During the regular season, these traits are tempered and used sparingly if at all. But during the final days of the year, they are unleashed. Primarily this works because the allure of "winning it all" allows for the normally bad traits to work their potential for success. We don't usually like villains. In movies they are the ones we root against. Think Darth Vader as perhaps the greatest example, especially of a character that started good and turned evil. In music, some of us gravitate toward the bad actors but still hold part of them in contempt. Certainly, in real life, nefarious characteristics in politics, medicine, and business are judged harshly and properly.

Much of this is because of the dichotomous way we view the world. Be good. Don't be bad. It's a fairly simple rule that we are taught from a young age. But is there a gray area to this? Are there exceptions to this general rule where it's actually beneficial to embrace the darker sides to ourselves? It would seem yes.

The work that we can do in learning about those parts was deemed shadow work by Jung. Later developed by modern psychoanalysts, they realized we all have this shadow self, these more negative traits and characteristics. And, it turns out, the more we can get to know them and not ignore them, the healthier and happier we can be.

Not just get to know them but actually utilize them. So often we repress these parts of ourselves because we are afraid of the damage they cause. But if we harness them properly, then we can recognize that they exist in the same way alongside our more admirable attributes and; we can then learn how to use them for good.

In Judaism, the *yetzer hara*, our evil inclination is probably the closest analog to the villainous parts of the self. The general way of viewing it is something that is part of us that we're always trying to dampen or rid ourselves of fully. But what if instead of thinking about it like that, we recognize it as having potential benefit for us? And that one particularly ripe time for this is Shavuot?

On Shavuot, in the times of the Beit Hamikdash, the sacrifice offered was known as the *Shtei Ha'lechem*, the two leavened loaves which we read about in the 23rd chapter of Vayikra. This is a lovely idea as on shavuot, we are thankful for the harvest so bread makes sense...except for the fact that we

were outright forbidden from offering chametz on the altar way back in the beginning of Vayikra: "No *mincha* that you offer to *Hashem* shall be made with *chametz*, for no *chametz* or honey may be offered as an offering by fire to *Hashem."* Seems fairly clear, right?

Except there are exceptions. One is the *Korban Todah*, the Thanksgiving offering which contains both matzah and chametz. That makes a certain amount of sense. It's an offering of pure gratitude to God for a multitude of situations in life, not for sin like the other offerings. And since it's meant to be the only offering that will be around in the redemptive period, an exception can be made for it. But what about the *Shtei Halechem?* Why does it get special treatment?

To understand that, we have to understand why *chametz* on the altar is so problematic. Out of the Passover prohibitions, the sages allegorize *Chametz* as "*se'or shebe'isa*," "the yeast in the dough." This is the Yetzer Hara: greed, pride, or arrogance. All of that spiritual gunk that the preparation of Pesach is meant to root out.

So it becomes fairly clear why the Torah and later sages would warn us from ever using chametz on the altar. After all, sacrifices in general come to forge the disconnect between us and God when we've been sinful. So we'd never want to use an element that stands in for sin as the mechanism to bring us closer to God. This then brings us back to Shavuot and the chametz offering we make. What makes Shavuot different that it **requires** a chametz offering?

The first offering is from the Kli Yakar, who riffs on two Talmudic ideas, one of which we mentioned first that *chametz* is the leavening in the dough, the *yetzer hara* and that the Torah was only given in order to combat the *yetzer hara.* He goes on to say that when the Torah is present the *yetzer hara* can't even exist. This is why he says the verse mentions, "*chametz te'afena* that you must bake specifically leavened dough." The only way there's an exception to the rule of using chametz is because of the power of the Torah. Its force offsets the negative power of the evil inclination.

This is a lofty answer that works for a world that is black and white. If chametz is bad and overpowers almost everything else, we need the one thing that can combat it. That's Torah. We deliberately bring the thing that's forbidden in order to show its antidote. That's lovely. But that's also not the world in which most of us live. This dynamic feels more reflective of the binary I described earlier. Sure, it's best to be good all the time ,but we all know we'll never fully eradicate our wayward parts.

The other, more nuanced answer comes from the Bat Ayin, Reb Avraham Dov Auerbach of Avritch in Ukraine in the 18th century. He relates the fact that this whole business began on Pesach where everything we deal with is solely Matzah. This is because Matzah is a God-centric food and Pesach is a God-centric holiday. The redemptive power of that holiday is a reminder that we have to rely on God.

But on Shavuot, we need *chametz* because it relies on our hand in its production. He quotes a Midrash where a Roman tries to one-up Rabbi Akiva by asking him why, if God is so great, do humans mess with God's creation through circumcision? After all, God could've created us circumcised.

Rabbi Akiva answers by bringing forth a grain and a piece of bread and asking the Roman which is a more refined product? He uses the Midrash to illustrate that *chametz* is a symbol of the power of the human partnership with God. God needs us to harness our power through the relationship with Torah and our deeds to refine the world.

This is why the Israelites needed to prepare themselves for revelation by refraining from certain bodily activities. Shavuot is a time of purifying the material nature of our environment: our speech and our actions. Everything is dependent on us, not just reliant on God. How we wield that is also how we can control the evil inclination.

In my eyes, it's a more powerful and real reflection on our relationship with *chametz,* and in turn, the *yetzer hara*. Instead of it being a zero sum game where we fully eliminate it, seemingly a fool's errand, it becomes a more realistic ask of, how can I know what my *yetzer hara* is, channel it, and then transform it?

This reminds us that there once was a time in the Garden of Eden that before the sin of Adam and Eve, the evil inclination was actually a powerful force that built the world. It's part of what makes the Torah and our tradition so powerful. We need the Torah, its stories, directives, and characters to remind us of our own power and potential.

It doesn't need to be some great and lengthy project. It doesn't matter what you learn or how long you learn for. Just learn something. When we find ourselves in relationship with our tradition's texts, it allows us to tap into something larger than ourselves. This is what we celebrate on Shavuot. In turn, we can then understand the fullness of who we are. Certainly all the positive traits that we have but also our shadow selves.

Just like those sports stars that know how to activate those traits in the right moments when it's called for, the giving of the Torah reminds us that within proper limits, our darker traits can be wielded for good. It goes either way. A couple nights ago, one of the best players on the Dallas Stars cross-checked another player and got himself knocked out of the game. His team got beaten badly.

There is a delicate balance with this. Left unchecked, we can knock ourselves out of the game. But measured carefully with the power of the Torah to offset it, we can wield all our traits, the most powerfully positive and the most potent negative ones to a forceful combination that allows us to make it to the promised land.

Chag Sameach,
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