

*No man sins for someone else.
—Baba Metzia, 8.*

Does it matter why we sin?

This is a question someone asked at Chever Torah. Consider this perspective...

*"Malaria was impossible to conquer until we realized it is contracted through mosquito bites. During the Middle Ages hundreds of thousands died because we did not know bubonic plague traveled by way of the rats infesting our cities."
(TGAM)*

To conquer epidemics, doctors need to know how disease spreads. To solve cases, detectives try to understand perpetrators' motives. To win wars, generals seek to know their enemies. To live the right way, I must understand the forces that make me "do what I do not want to do." (Ro 7:16)

According to Rabbinic Judaism... We all have two basic impulses: the *yetzer ha-ra* (evil impulse) and the *yetzer tov* (good impulse). We are born with a pure or morally neutral soul. Only our own choices determine whether we incur the guilt of sin. If we choose to sin, we can return to moral neutrality or purity through *teshuvah*, or "returning." The idea that sin is simply a choice is also widely held in secular America today.

The idea of the *yetzer ha-ra* may come from story of the Flood:

The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination [yetzer] of the thoughts of his heart was only evil [ra] all the time. (Ge 6:5-6) NIV

There are eight other Hebrew verses containing the word *yetzer*, but no Hebrew verses mention a good impulse. Noah is the only man described as morally pure (*tamim*, or "blameless") yet after that time even Noah chooses drunkenness to the point of lewd behavior (see Ge 6:9 and Ge 9:21).

Teshuva, or "returning," as the solution for separation from God...

Rabbinic Judaism teaches that a sinner may return to moral purity by "returning" (repenting) and making restitution for any damage caused by his or her sin. This idea is based in part upon the following solution to sin found in Ezekiel:

"But if a wicked man turns away [shuv, the root of teshuvah] from all the sins he has committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, he will surely live; he will not die. None of the offenses he has committed will be remembered against him. Because of the righteous things he has done, he will live. (Eze 18:21-22) NIV

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A difficulty with this Jewish idea arises when we read other Hebrew scriptures on the purity of our souls:

Do not bring your servant into judgment, for no one living is righteous before you. (Ps 143:2) NIV

There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins. (Eccl 7:20) NIV

Does God expect us to be righteous all the time?

The Christian view. The idea that God does indeed demand absolute righteousness is based in part upon this command, repeated several times in the Torah:

I am the LORD who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy. (Lv 11:45) NIV

The traditional Christian understanding of this command (repeated five times in Leviticus) is that it requires us to be as holy (“pure” or “set apart”) as the Lord, and this means we must be perfectly righteous, not just partially righteous.

A Jewish objection. “Holiness” and “righteousness” are not synonymous, therefore we need not be righteous to be holy:

The issue of “purity” does not concern ethics, does not intersect with ethics, and does not stand in tension with ethics when one has attained “acceptability in the holy place” even though guilty of a lack of mercy... (Rabbi Jacob Neusner A Rabbi Talks with Jesus (New York: Doubleday, 1993), p. 121)

Christian response: The “purity” mentioned by Rabbi Neusner above is the same as “holiness” (the word is *kadosh*, which technically means “set apart”). With the following verse, the Torah teaches that “holiness” is closely related to, perhaps identical to, “cleanness” (*tahor*):

You must distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean... (Lv 10:10-11) NIV

Jesus discusses the relationship of ethics/morality to “cleanness” (Rabbi Neusner’s “purity”) below:

For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man “unclean”; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him “unclean.” (Mt 15:19–20) NIV

Another, more common objection: Leviticus does not say, “Be holy as the Lord is holy;” it says, “Be holy *because* the Lord is holy.” Since the level of holiness required is not *based* on God’s perfection, but rather *because* of it, we are only required to be as holy as is humanly possible.

Response: Referring back to the Ezekiel verses quoted above, note that the wicked man is not told he must keep God’s decrees to the best of his ability; he is told he must keep them all. The Hebrew word for “all” is *kol*. It is used in more

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than fifty other Hebrew scriptures to describe the level of obedience God expects to his commands and decrees.

Is God unfair to demand perfection?

Consider this promise from the prophet Moses, regarding the laws of the Torah:

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it. (Dt 30:11-14) NIV

Also consider the following quote from a well known book on how to achieve quality in business:

*We all have our own standards in business or academic life—our own points at which errors begin to bother us. It is good to get an A in school, but it may be OK to pass with a C. We do not maintain these standards, however, when it comes to our personal life. If we did, we should expect to be shortchanged every now and then when we cash our paycheck; we should expect hospital nurses to drop a constant percentage of newborn babies; we should resign ourselves to going home to the wrong house periodically, by mistake. We as individuals do not tolerate these things. We have a dual standard... (Philip B. Crosby, *Quality Is Free* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), p. 201.)*

Finally, return to Ezekiel again, just a few verses after the section already quoted above:

"Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' Hear, O house of Israel: Is my way unjust? Is it not your ways that are unjust? If a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits sin, he will die for it; because of the sin he has committed he will die. But if a wicked man turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he will save his life. Because he considers all the offenses he has committed and turns away from them, he will surely live; he will not die. Yet the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' Are my ways unjust, O house of Israel? Is it not your ways that are unjust? (Eze 18:25-29) NIV

- ▶ What difficulty is created by **Ps 143:2** and **Eccl 7:20** when compared to **Eze 18:21-22**?
- ✓ Ezekiel says the wicked man will live "because of the righteous things he has done," yet the Psalms and Ecclesiastes say no one living is righteous before God.
- ▶ Why might Rabbi Neusner say "purity" and ethics are not related? (Hint: remember the strict definition of the Hebrew word *kadosh*.)
- ✓ Technically, one could be "set apart" from righteousness (i.e. purely evil), and therefore "holy" in the literal definition of *kadosh*, yet not righteous.

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The Gospel according to

MOSES

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- ▶ What is Jesus' position on the matter? (See **Mat 15:19-20**.)
 - ✓ The only purity, or holiness that matters is actual righteousness behavior.
 - Rabbi Neusner is splitting hairs by basing an objection on semantics.
- ▶ Why would God expect us to keep *all* of His decrees and commands? (Hint: remember the Torah's explanation for why we must be holy (**Lv 11:45**, above), remember **Hab 1:13**, and remember Nadab and Abihu.)
 - ✓ If we are to be in harmony with the Lord, we must join God in His perfect holiness. As discussed in earlier lessons, anything less than perfect holiness cannot be allowed in His presence because it will pollute His holiness (or more accurately: it would be consumed or destroyed by His perfect holiness, as were Nadab and Abihu).
- ▶ Is Moses' statement in **Dt 30:11-14** (above) true, or are some of God's commands too difficult to obey?
 - ✓ Technically, we could indeed obey all—*kol*—of the Lord's commands. None of them are humanly impossible.
 - ✓ Ask the class to suggest a Bible command that is humanly impossible.
- ▶ What is the connection between God's point in the Ezekiel 18:25-29 quote above, and Philip Crosby's point above?
 - ✓ Crosby points out that we demand perfection from each other, yet expect to be exempt from it ourselves.
 - ✓ Through Ezekiel, God says we apply this same double standard to Him. He offers perfect justice ("Be righteous and live; be wicked and die.") yet we say, "We want to be wicked and live, and if you do not suspend justice, you are not just."
- ▶ Think about Moses' statement that God's commands are "not too difficult," and the Psalmist's statement that "no one living is righteous," and Ezekiel's warning that those who commit sin "will die for it," and answer the first question in this lesson: *does it matter why we sin?*
 - ✓ Since we could be perfectly obedient (it is technically possible) and yet no one living is righteous, and since unrighteousness leads to death, it is vital to our survival that we answer the question, "Why do I sin?" in order to know what to do about it, so we can find a way to live.

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