

Paper Title: JUDAISM'S *YETZER* AS A BIO-THEOLOGICAL CONSTRUCT

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Abstract:

All world religions, whether oriented particularly or universally, make the attempt to construe man's elemental nature. This paper attempts to describe how both the Biblical and rabbinic concept of *yetzer*, natural man's most basic inclination, serves as the window through which Judaism's depiction of human nature may be viewed.

Though the Biblical *yetzer* is presented as a unitary concept, the Rabbis bifurcated the impulse into, on the one hand, a good *yetzer* stressing Torah learning and restraint and, on the other hand, an evil *yetzer* emphasizing unbridled license and sexual appetite. This dualistic structure, however, became further nuanced as rabbinic language saw the evil *yetzer* as not only evil, but also good, and necessary to promote man's creativity and productivity.

Further discussion will show how descriptions and personifications of the *yetzer* in Jewish religious texts are harmonious with what evolutionary psychologists call the short-term male reproductive strategy. The logic of that mating strategy will be introduced, and interpretations will be presented linking the relevant biological theory to Judaism's evil *yetzer*.

Much of the discourse by evolutionary thinkers over the past several decades has characterized biological theory and religion as necessarily occupying different worlds. This paper makes an attempt to show how Judaism, a religion of ancient lineage, developed a basic theological and behavioral component in consonance with part of evolutionary psychology's description of man's essential nature.

Biography:

Rick Goldberg is an independent scholar and President of the Binah Yitzrit Foundation, a group that funds research at the intersection of evolutionary psychology and Judaism. Goldberg is an active participant and teacher at his conservative synagogue in Austin, Texas. By profession, he is an environmental consultant, assisting small Texas communities and schools with utilities planning using drip irrigation technology. Rick is married with one adult daughter.

Paper:

"The only reason why the love of [physical science] has been implanted in man is in order to support the [rational study] of religion, both together making an excellent combination."-- Saadia Gaon, 10th Century Judaic rationalist

Jewish Religious Texts and Liturgy Construct Human Nature

In the first verse of the Bible, God is described as initiating creation (*barah*) of the universe *ex nihilo*. In the beginning, chaos began to be transformed into a natural order (Gen. 1:1). Once the inorganic features had been finished, the creation of life ensues, and is depicted as a systematic progression of biological categories. The passage in which the method for man's origin is first described (Gen. 2:7) uses a different verb, *yotzer*, than the verb *barah* used in 1:1 to describe the process. The Hebrew word *barah*, used to mean creation of the inorganic (earth, water, heavens), implies causing to exist from elements not pre-existing (*yesh mi ain*, or "something from nothing"). *Yotzar*, on the other hand, can best be translated as "formed", a developmental process reconfiguring existing elements into new forms. To illustrate, in modern Hebrew, a *yotzer* is a potter or craftsman; i.e., one who changes an existing material into a different, more useful, form. Along those lines, man (and his driving impulse) is described as being of natural origin, having been crafted (*yotzer*) from the clay of the earth (Psalms 103:14). In his Biblical commentary, Rashi describes God's fashioning of man as similar to the way a baker prepares and kneads his dough (2:6).

Further along in the Genesis account can be found additional clues for fleshing out the biblical concept of *yetzer*. After man has chosen to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge, God comments on man's changed status: "Behold, the man becomes one of us by knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:22). As God observes mankind operating in the world, He displays disappointment resulting from man's innate propensity for only "evil thoughts all day" (continually) (Gen. 6:5). In the Hebrew, "evil thoughts" is a construct-word containing the root "*yetzer*". To amplify further, the text tells us that "man's imagination is evil from his youth" (Gen. 8:21), utilizing again the Hebrew word *yetzer* to mean "imagination". In interpreting this verse, the Rabbis discussed at which stage of life the evil urge (*yetzer*) enters man. The consensus was that, like a genetic trait, the *yetzer* is inborn, being established at the time of conception (Gen. Rabah 32, 34; Eccl. Rabah 9:14). Evidence of the *yetzer*'s dominance during childhood is said to be found in children's self-centeredness. Reinforcing the biological origin and character of the *yetzer*, it was also decided that the *yetzer* exists in men but not in angels, and, in this world, but not in the world to come. The angels are viewed as "free from it (the *yetzer*) because they do not carry earthly corporeality" (Lev. Rabah 24). The *yetzer* inclination is thus seen as an elementary, imbedded ingredient of man's biological functioning in this world (but absent in the world-to-come when, it is presumed, man ceases to function biologically).

What we know about *yetzer* from Genesis is that it is an inherent propensity, compelling man's narcissistic thoughts. The *yetzer* was characterized by the Rabbis as an inborn mechanism (*élan vital*), included by God from the beginning in man's biological packaging (in contrast, the Christian doctrine of original sin posits the origin of evil in the *choice* made by Adam and Eve to disobey God). Genesis also makes it clear that animals were formed (*yetzer*) in the same way, evidence that this elemental essence is not unique to humans (see Gen. 2:19). In modern Hebrew, the adjective form *yitzri* means "instinctual", a biological adjective applicable to all organisms.

Within the daily and Sabbath liturgy, the natural order is often referred to as the product of creation. During the morning blessings, for example, God is thanked for the “rooster being able to tell the difference between night and day” (and therefore knowing when to crow), for “numbering the stars and giving each one a name” (Psalm 147), for “giving to the beasts their food and the ravens that for which they call” (ibid), and for creating a world “by whose laws nature abides” (Psalm 148). Man’s physiological nature is given its own blessing, in which God is thanked for forming (*yatzar*) us, and, by being responsible for our healthy biological operation, causing the various valves and openings that regulate our bodies to function properly. From an evolutionary perspective, the most interesting blessing is the one in which God is acknowledged for “day after day, continually, renewing the work of creation”. Judaism teaches that “creation is not an act that happened once upon a time, once and for ever”. Rather, “the act of bringing the world into existence is a continuous process” (Heschel, p. 100) in which God “renews the face of the earth” (Psalm 104). When God is praised for creation, the verb referring to the process of creating is stated in the present, not the past tense, thus claiming the process to be a continuing one (Nehemiah 9:6, Mishnah Berachot 7:5 and 9:2). The concept of creation as an ongoing process of re-creation may be seen theologically as consonant with and predictive of the paradigm of natural selection. In Psalm 92 (read on the Sabbath), God’s “designs” [of the natural order] are described as “deeply profound,” a wording reminiscent of the complex, proximately hidden, Darwinian dynamic.

Proper functioning of the natural order is viewed as essential within biblical theology. In describing the conditions predating the Flood, the Bible generalizes that “all flesh had corrupted its ways on earth” (Gen. VI:13). Natural law became so perverted that all life, except the remnant saved on Noah’s Ark, was seen as needing to be destroyed. Rabbinic commentary explained the nature of pre-Flood corruption by describing the pandemonium of sexual anomalies—“cattle had perverse relations with wild beasts, and man with both cattle and wild beasts” (Talmud Sanhedrin 108a). “Even the earth acted like a harlot...farmers harvested weeds though wheat had been planted” (Gen. Rabbah 28.8). Ibn Ezra, 12th century commentator, added that dogs copulated with wolves and chickens with peacocks. He summarized the vivid discussion of the subject: “No living creature adhered any longer to the laws of its procreation, flagrantly perverting the known path implanted in it.” The tradition has subsequently accepted the explanation that the Flood was visited on the world as a result of the perversion of what should have been a fixed biological order first established during the six days of creation.

Normative Judaism has always insisted on a monistic understanding of the natural world as the product of both the mind of God and His ongoing creative impulse (Freedman, p. 63). In ancient times, Israelite priests had to possess a command of animal anatomy and diseases, given the centrality of animal sacrifice in the Temple cult. Later, Rabbinic Judaism would demand an equal measure of familiarity concerning the natural world. Competence in Judaic laws pertaining to circumcision, female fertility and menstruation, the prohibition against commingling diverse plants, animals or fibers and kosher slaughtering, all required a foundation of concrete biological knowledge.

Rabbinic Discovery of Two Yetzers

“...healthy-mindedness is inadequate as a philosophical doctrine, because the evil facts which it refuses to positively account for are a genuine portion of reality; they may be the best key to life’s significance, the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth.”

--William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience

One result of rabbinic exegesis on this topic is that the biblical *yetzer* as a unified, innate propensity was bifurcated into a good *yetzer* and an evil *yetzer*. The Rabbinic division of the *yetzer* into two distinct aspects is never self-evident within the biblical wording; nevertheless, the Rabbis read between the lines to discover the existence of two *yetzers*. Within the text of Gen. II:7 (referenced above), the first letter (*yod*) of the verb *yetzer* is written twice. Since not even one letter can be dismissed as extraneous, the Rabbis declared that the two *yods* represented the existence of two *yetzers* within man, one a force for good and the other a force for evil (Berachot 60b). As further proof, the most repeated biblical verse in Jewish liturgy, the *sh’ma* (Deut. 6:5), contains the requirement to “love God with all your heart”. There are two words used in Biblical Hebrew for “heart”, and, in this instance, the verse uses the word *levav* instead of *lev*. Noticing that the conjugated form of “your heart” (*levavecha*) contains a double letter *vav*, the Rabbis deduced that the obligation to love God with **all** one’s heart means with both one’s good and evil *yetzer* (Mishnah Berachot 9:5). As Schofer suggests, these rabbinic deductions created a “small anthology of binary contrasts” (p. 27). Though the bifurcated *yetzer* is accepted without objection in Rabbinic commentary, the dualism is not found in the Bible.

As the evil *yetzer* is given great biological amplitude by the Rabbis and characterized by embodied action, the good *yetzer* is seen not as inborn but as the product of cultural conditioning (Torah training). There is rabbinic disagreement regarding at which age each *yetzer* becomes operative. One source claims that [in an individual] the evil *yetzer* is thirteen years older than the good *yetzer* (Avot..., Nos. 1-6), implying that the evil *yetzer* is innate at birth. In other passages from Avot, the evil *yetzer*’s origin is placed before birth, in the father’s semen (Nos. 7-10). The inability of children to control their desires and impulses is seen as evidence of the primordial existence of the evil *yetzer*. The good *yetzer*, on the other hand, gains strength only after a measure of Torah instruction, vesting at the time of one’s social maturity (*bar mitzvah*). As the child becomes fully developed, control over his budding sexual desire is made possible only by dedication to Torah study.

While Judaism depicts the human as having a monistic nature, rabbinic texts model that singular nature as dialectic in structure (Boyarin, p. 64). As a result, an argument can be made that the evil and good *yetzers* are not parallel, built-in propensities. Rather, that “evil” behavior is as innate as our genetic blueprint, and “good” behavior is a Judaism-

derived result of socialization. As Biale confirms, “The good inclination is learned; the evil one instinctual.” Seen in this light, Judaism’s moral requirements are a learned set of Torah requisites imposed only on Jews. According to this logic, Judaic man (as well as all others) should be seen as inherently evil, with goodness emerging only to the extent that cultural norms (*halacha*) overlap and constrain natural behaviors.

In the Genesis account, all living creatures come to exist after having been *formed* from pre-existing matter. Perhaps, therefore, even non-human *forms* of life can be said to contain the genetic foundation of *yetzer*. Once all other creatures had been formed, God proclaims, “Let *us* now make man in *our* image”. Since Judaism claims God as the sole Creator, why is plural language used instead of singular? This dilemma might be resolved by suggesting that God and the existing creatures were co-creators of human descent--that the formation of humans depended on an antecedent process in which the other creatures played a necessary part. That ancestral process could be seen as evolution by natural selection.

Evolutionary Psychology’s Short-Term Male Reproductive Strategy

In reproductive terminology, males typically produce millions of tiny sex cells (sperm gametes) daily, even as females typically produce a few hundred much larger sex cells (egg gametes) during a lifetime. This overwhelming asymmetry, called *anisogamy*, results in men and women pursuing widely differing mating strategies. Females of our polygynous species are characteristically more choosy than men in their sexual partners, a phenomenon stemming directly from the fact of *anisogamy*.

Continuous male super production of gametes brings by itself no great penalty for the squandering of semen in marginally rewarding sexual encounters. As a result, men are much more likely than women to desire sexual variety *per se*. Though men do discriminate in choosing sex partners, the prospect of impersonal novelty is more influential in male than female sexual choice (see Ridley [1], p. 266). That men are more partial to variety and prejudicial against familiarity can be termed the short-term male reproductive strategy, described anecdotally as the Coolidge Effect (see Symons [2], p. 211 & Buss, pp. 79-81):

One day the President and Mrs. Coolidge were taking separate tours of a farm. As Mrs. Coolidge passed the chicken pens, she paused to ask the man in charge if the rooster copulates more than once a day. “Dozens of times a day,” replied the farmer. “Would you please tell that to the President when he comes?,” she asked. When the President passed the pens, he was told the answer given to his wife. He then asked, “Same hen every time?” “Oh, no Mr. President“, said the farmer, “a different hen each time.” The President then nodded, saying, “Tell that, please, to Mrs. Coolidge.”

In the evolutionary history of polygynous species like chickens and humans, male reproductive success was often attained through opportunistic copulations with appealing, willing females. In the short-term male strategy, “men who impregnated as

many women as possible produced more children, even if they didn't stay to help raise them" (Ackerman, p. 156).

Female sexual allure for men includes a combination of youthfulness, healthfulness, status, facial features of average size and shape, nubile waist-hip ratio and comparatively bilateral symmetry. In their normally visual erotic imaginings, men are likely to view others, usually females, as reproductively valuable *objects* of interest (Ellis, p. 529). Though attraction is not the only factor in male sexual choice, it remains the most important one. (see Symons [1], p. 87). Selection in human evolutionary history has placed a premium on physical appearance due to the "abundance of reliable cues it provides to the reproductive potential" of women. For men, female attractiveness is a "deeply ingrained psychological mechanism" driving mating desires and decisions (Buss, p. 70).

The common expression of short-term male reproductive eros is called lust, a desire that often results in philandering. As Ridley states, "Humanity shares the profile of ardent, polygamist males...with about 99% of all animal species, including our closest relatives, the apes" ([1] p. 178). To paraphrase Fisher, regardless of local marriage traditions, divorce customs and cultural mores about sex, all forty-two ethnographies (to which she refers) about different peoples past and present acknowledged the influential presence of adultery. "There exists no culture in which adultery is unknown, no cultural device or code that extinguishes philandering...even where adultery is punished by death" (p. 87).

It is not implied here that the short-term male reproductive strategy governs all male sexual desires and mating behaviors. Both sexes have a long-term reproductive strategy, designed to influence them to provide resources to the offspring they have created. More so than almost every other species, the short human gestation period has the consequence of requiring substantial parental (and/or alloparental) investment for several years to insure that offspring survive to reproductive age. But of our species' four generally recognized reproductive strategies, the short-term male strategy is utilized in this paper due to its obvious consonance with the Judaic bio-theological construction called *yetzer*.

The Judaic Construction of *Yetzer*: *Mashal le-Mah Hadavar Domeh* ("To What May This Matter Be Compared"?)

Man's Biblical *yetzer* refers to purpose or function as well as formative matter. As a result, *yetzer* can also be construed as *imagination* or *disposition*, a rendering as unconsciously purposeful as a biological reproductive strategy. To illustrate, the adjective *yitzri* means *instinctual* in modern Hebrew usage. In Rabbinic discourse, the evil *yetzer* is the source of anger, revenge, greed, deceit, pride, religious unbelief and idolatry, a broad range of transgressive emotions and behaviors (Porter, p.132). This paper, however, emphasizes the evil *yetzer* in its most common rabbinic depiction, male lustfulness. The purpose here is to explore the mating strategy correlate of the *yetzer* construct within Darwinian sexual selection theory.

The colorful talmudic personifications of the evil *yetzer* as beguiler and seducer can be seen as the origin of lust and consonant with, it is suggested, the short-term male reproductive strategy. Like one's genetic inheritance, the wellspring of the *yetzer* is antecedent in origin and operation, portrayed as a sexual force with deterministic power:

- If the evil *yetzer* says to you, “Sin, and God will forgive you, “ don’t believe it (Hag. 16a, quoted in Montefiore, p. 296).
- The Rabbis taught: We should not put opportunity to sin even before an honest man, much less before a thief, for the sages say this is like putting fire next to a burlap sack. (Tanh. B. Metsora 26b)
- The evil inclination (*yetzer*) is sweet at the beginning and bitter at the end (Shabbat Rabbah 14:3)
- The *yetzer* appears as a “modest traveler”, even a “welcome guest”, only, in the end, to exact obedience from the master of the house (Sukkah 52a).
- The *yetzer* represents himself as harmless, but, later on, overwhelms with masculine strength. He deals with man feigning weakness (like a helpless dog), but when man is off his guard, he jumps on him and makes him sin (Gen. Rabah 22:6). At first the *yetzer* is as fragile as the thread of a spider, but eventually the thread becomes as tough as cart ropes (Sukkah 52a).
- Commenting on the verse, “Let there be no strange god within you” (Psalm 81:10), R. Jannai says that one who obeys his *yetzer* (the “strange god”) is practicing a form of idolatry (Tanh. I:284).
- When the evil *yetzer* sees a man swaggering [so women will notice], showing off his clothes and arranging his hair, He says, “That man belongs to me!” He who spoils his *yetzer* by tender and considerate treatment (allowing it to slowly gain dominion) will end by becoming His slave (Gen. Rabah 22:6).
- The *yetzer* is the “tempter”, inciting to sexual impropriety. All sexual intercourse performed more with the purpose of satisfying one’s sexual appetite than with perpetuating the human species is tainted by one’s *yetzer* (Lev. Rabah 14:5).
- *Yetzer* is the “foolish old king” who accompanies man from earliest youth to old age, and to whom all the body’s organs show obedience (Eccl. Rabah 4:13)
- He is the “spoiler” who spares none, bringing man to lust even in old age (Gen. Rabah 54:1).

As is apparent in many of the above personifications, the *yetzer* is depicted as a potentially self-destructive animus, almost beyond his control, exerting power over his behavior. As such, this natural force can be seen as an evolved, inherited complex of

traits biologists refer to above as “mating strategies”. As was previously discussed, a mating strategy is a set of behaviors when choosing mates that predisposes individuals to act according to “pre-existing” inclinations that proved reproductively successful during the evolutionary history of their human ancestors.

Commenting on Gen 6:5 (“man’s thoughts are evil only and all day”), R. Isaac comments that the *yetzer* masters man by renewing itself all day (Ked. 30b). What can be considered the biological corollary to this rabbinic characterization? The answer can be found in the paradigmatic characteristic of development in human males: the production of sperm and the desire to ejaculate “renews itself” forcefully every day.

Below are three passages, two from recent books with an evolutionary perspective on human behavior, and the third of Talmudic origin. The first excerpt contains the last paragraph of a self-help book:

We should enjoy our animal passions and even indulge them but prevent them from controlling us. The key to a satisfying life is finding a middle ground that combines free-flowing pleasure, iron willpower, and the crafty manipulation of ourselves and our situations. Our temptations are powerful and persistent, but we are not destined to succumb. Ancient and selfish, our mean genes influence us every day in almost every day. But because we can predict their influence, self-knowledge plus discipline can provide a winning strategy in the battle to lead satisfying and moral lives (Burnham and Phelan, p. 252).

In the second passage, a *yetzer*-like demon is depicted in the folkways of many peoples:

Time and again we see [in religious myth] an evil being that tries, in the guise of innocence, to entice people into seemingly minor but ultimately momentous wrongdoing...For example, natural selection “wants” men to have sex with an endless series of women...The concept of evil doesn’t fit easily into a modern scientific worldview...There is indeed a force devoted to enticing us into various pleasures that are (or once were) in our genetic interests but do not bring long-term happiness to us and may bring great suffering to others (Wright, pp. 367-8).

Compare the language of these two excerpts with the following Talmudic dictum:

When the Evil Inclination takes control, there is no one to remind you of the Good Inclination (Nedarim 32b).

As is plainly evident, the notions expressed in the first two passages could have, like the third, been written by the Rabbis suggesting ways to acknowledge and overcome the influence of the evil *yetzer*. Just as the Rabbis assert that failure to control the evil *yetzer* undermines long-term well-being, so do some evolutionary psychologists (and many others) see pursuit of the short-term male reproductive strategy as undermining the more beneficial male and female strategy of long-term investment in offspring. To the extent that men chase the short-term strategy (“cads”), they diminish their potential success as

long-term investors in their children (“dads”). Note how the following parable from a latter Rabbinic source illustrates this point:

...to what can the bad *yetzer* be compared? To two people who entered an inn (to rob). One was seized for robbing. They said to him, “Who is with you?” He could have said, “My friend was not with me,” but he thinks, “Because I will be killed, let my friend be killed with me.” Thus, so thinks the bad *yetzer*, “Because I am lost to the world to come (afterlife), I will make the entire body perish” (from Schofer, p. 45).

The Evil *Yetzer* Viewed as Good

At this point in discussing the *yetzer*, Judaism’s approach to human nature becomes more complex. Good and evil are not viewed in Judaism as inclinations acting separately or necessarily in opposition to one another; rather, they are seen as two aspects of a larger, unified whole. Consequently, the rabbinic characterization of the evil *yetzer* became a nuanced one, in which the *yetzer* urge was enlarged to include all of what today could be called man’s competitive initiative and productivity. When reading the Genesis account of creation, one may notice that the process ends on each of the first five days with the words, “And God saw that it was good.” But at the end of the sixth day (when man was created), the text reads, “And God saw everything that He had made and, behold, it was **very** good.” In the additional word “very”, the Rabbis saw a reference to the creation of the evil *yetzer*, implying its positive quality (Gen. R. 34). In this light, the evil *yetzer* suggests self-aggrandizing, not only through sensual pleasure but also through gaining competitive and productive power. Patai suggests that the Rabbis use the term “evil *yetzer*” in the same sense that psychology uses the word *libido* as the “driving force behind human action” (p. 500).

The “evil” *yetzer* became the capacity for self-interest which, if properly channeled, leads to human achievement; if left undisciplined, to immorality and ruin. In fact, the Talmud asks the question in direct language: “Who is the mighty individual? The one who conquers his *yetzer*” (Pirkei Avot 4:1). The larger one’s persona (such as a great scholar), the more powerful is the *yetzer* within him (Sukkah 52a). By this is meant that “greater” men invariably engage in more difficult moral struggles. More illustratively, the Rabbis wrote that “were it not for the sexual impulse (evil *yetzer*), no man would build a house, marry a woman or engage in an occupation. All labor and skillful work comes from a man’s competition with others” (Bereshit R. 9:7). Ecclesiastes adds that “...all labor and skillful enterprise come from men’s envy of each other” (4:4). Giving

credit to those who made productive contributions to the completion of his Temple, King Solomon asks his followers to “remember the *yetzer*-thoughts of their hearts” (I Chron. 29:18).

Thus the evil *yetzer* is not viewed as only shameful or sinful. Judaism sees human initiative (including sexual desire) as a healthy, even necessary life force when kept within prescribed limits. The struggle against the evil *yetzer* does not mean withdrawal from or denial of the world and its activities, but, rather, conquering one’s *yetzer* while

living fully in the world (Urbach, p. 475). As Rashi wrote, “If a man alienated his desire completely, he would reduce the propagation of the species...” (quoted in Urbach, p. 477). Proper balance is the rabbinic objective: “Man has a small organ—starve it and it is sated, overuse it and it remains hungry” (Sanhedrin 107a). In sum, the Rabbis see sexuality in general as a powerful drive with very destructive possibilities but nonetheless necessary as both a creative and procreative force (Boyarin, p. 74).

What would ensue if the evil *yetzer* were (totally) destroyed? According to Rabbinic legend, on a certain occasion Israel prayed that the Evil Impulse be handed over to them (for destruction). The Prophet Elijah warned them that, were the *yetzer* to be destroyed, the whole world would collapse. Nevertheless, when Israel’s prayers were answered, they imprisoned the *yetzer* for three days. But, during that time, when they looked for a fresh egg, none could be found in all the Land of Israel. Then the people prayed that, if they agreed to free the *yetzer*, would God agree that henceforth all urges and desires would be licit ones? To their disappointment, the response of heaven was that no conditional prayers would be answered. Since it was acknowledged that without the *yetzer* the world could not survive, the people blinded the *yetzer* [to keep him under control] and released him (disabled) back into the world (Yoma 69b). The dialectical instruction in this tale is that in order for there to be desire in men at all, there must also exist illicit desire.* And licit desire, productive and vital, is seen as necessary for the continuation of life. Though influenced by Platonic and Christian mind-body dualism (see Porter, pp. 93-97), the Rabbis nonetheless reject ethical dualism in favor of a monistic construction of *yetzer*. Comprised of both constructive and destructive forces, the *yetzer* retains its own singular existence and essence (Boyarin, p. 62).

The Rabbis view of *yetzer*-driven sexuality situated ideal behavior within the scale of human fragility. Controlling one’s *yetzer*-related urges was viewed as a great challenge. So unrelenting is one’s *yetzer* that, elaborating on Gen. 6:5, R. Isaac said that a man’s *yetzer* renews itself in him continually every day (Keddushin 36b). It was told of R. Akiva (the 1st Century Sage) that he mocked those who could not withstand the power of their *yetzer*, yet he himself was saved from falling before the “tempter” only by heavenly intercession (Kid. 81a). Finally, if a man sees that his *yetzer* is getting the best of him, he should go to a place where he is not known, put on black garments, and do what he desires in private (Hag. 16a). Better that a (Jewish) man commit a sin in secret than profane the name (of God) in public (Kid. 40a). The Rabbis also understood the power of self-deception: A person forever thinks that no matter how he acts, he is right, since the *yetzer* causes him to [rationalize] his course of action (Bereshit R. 10).

*This act of blinding (thus limiting) the *yetzer* is, quite interestingly, considered the origin of incest prohibition (*giluy arayot*) in Jewish law (Porter, p. 120).

The Jewish religious texts at times use food-related biological metaphors to characterize the *yetzer*. In one such instance, God is described as having given the Law as a *tavlin* (“seasoning” or “spice”) to temper the harshness of the *yetzer* (Kid. 30b). And men are free [and required] to obey the Law in spite of the acknowledged power of the evil *yetzer* (Ezek. 36:26). The *yetzer* as “leaven in the dough” is the rabbinic characterization most impregnated with biological possibility. The metaphor comes from the final daily prayer

of R. Alexander: “O Master of the World, it is revealed and known to You that it is our duty to do Your will, but what prevents us? The leaven in the dough...” (Berachot 17a). Leaven (yeast) is a biological agent, a catalyst used in baking to “enliven” the taste and texture of breads and other foods.

The process by which yeast does its work is fermentation, which, if kept within control, can add value to food and drink. When fermentation is excessive, however, the preparation will be spoiled, the bread unpalatable (Jacobs, p. 608). Like the *yetzer*, leaven is a ferment that can induce either decay or be a source of productivity and growth (Gordis, p. 106). Like the *yetzer*, yeast is an external agent incorporated by the (B)baker to function internally, transforming the flour and water into risen dough ready for the oven. “Leaven in the dough” is, as a result, an especially appropriate metaphor, revealing the rabbis’ analysis of the *yetzer* as dialectic in nature--useful, even necessary, for human functioning and progress, yet fraught with license and immorality if not controlled. As additional evidence, the Rabbis equate *yetzer* with *chametz*, the leavening agent (yeast) prohibited during the eight days of Passover.

In Judaism’s critical view, “any man who permits his appetites and impulses to dominate his faculty of cognition is undisciplined [literally, ‘uninstructed’]” (Saadia, p. 361). The Zohar warns that “the evil *yetzer* seduces with food and wine” (Bereshit 100). “At the time when man becomes excited and goes to do an immoral act, his entire body becomes involved because the evil *yetzer* rules over him” (Avot, p. 63). It is the obligation of the righteous person to overcome his baser self by “slaying” the evil inclination “all day long” and every day (see Fishbane, p. 138).

In summary, rabbinic synthesis of the *yetzer* posits Judaism, a learned framework, as an imposed overlay upon man’s instinctual, biological inclinations. The rabbis regarded the forbidden as precisely that which man desires the most, and which he forgoes only because of a theological command-construct that runs against his nature (Biale, p. 47-48). Avot d’Rabbi Natan (p. 64) relates the following: “Rabbi Simeon ben Elazar says, the bad *yetzer* can be compared to iron that is placed in a flame. All the time it is in the midst of the flame, people can make from it all the utensils that they want. So too, the bad *yetzer*: its only means of reform are the words of Torah, for they are like fire...” (Prov. 25:21-22). Study of the God-created Law is seen as an “antiseptic” to the *yetzer*’s urgings (Sifre Ch. 45, quoted in Moore, p. 481). The *yetzer* embodies a powerful, innate drive with very destructive possibilities, but it is also a necessary and productive force in the life of the world. Man’s *yetzer* has the potential to lead human beings to both enormous feats of creativity and love and, conversely, to enormous deeds of destruction and violence (Boyarin, p. 75).

Is There a *Yetzer* Instinct in Females?

Women also have a short term strategy that can reward opportunistic mating with high quality men willing or unwilling to invest in offspring. Pursuing this strategy, women seek male investors either by design (sugar daddy) or deception (cuckoldry). Rabbinic discourse on the *yetzer* and sexuality, however, is, in general, heavily androcentric.

The proceeding notwithstanding, female sexuality is taken into account within the framework of Rabbinic discourse. Generally, intercourse in marriage and the generation of offspring are mandated as religious values. In that tradition, the existence and importance of female sexuality is acknowledged but not explicitly described. Biblical law ordains that the husband “shall not deprive his wife of the...conjugal rights that are her due” (Exodus 21:10). Immediately after marriage, the husband was exempt from military service in ancient Israel for a full year in order to fulfill the obligation of “bringing joy to his wife” (Deut. 24:5).

In Talmudic discourse, female sexuality is seen as having its ebb and flow. The Talmud therefore declares that a woman has a right to reject sexual overtures by her husband--the husband is forbidden to pressure his wife to have sex when she is not so disposed (Gordis, pp. 102-103). Nowhere in the religious texts is the *yetzer* relegated only to men, but, as we have seen, descriptions and personifications of the *yetzer* conform much more to the male short-term reproductive strategy. In all Rabbinic sources, discourse about the two *yetzers* was “most likely written by men for other men...sexual desire is envisioned [exclusively] as that of a man for women” (Schofer, p. 49). Female sexuality is left as an unexamined given. It may be fairly concluded that, even though the sexuality of women is clearly recognized (and the *yetzer* is nowhere said to be limited to men only), the Rabbis viewed males as the more *yetzer*-activated sex in need of legal restraint. For men, “the visual temptations of forbidden women are everywhere, and only sexual satisfaction within marriage [displacing the *yetzer* urge] can overcome them” (Biale, p. 78).

The Nature of Evil

“Our descent, then, is the origin of our evil passions!!” -- Darwin, M Notebook (1838),

quoted in Wright, p. 327

Lyall Watson describes a biological view of evil as a force of nature. As in Judaic sources, he sees the evil found in human social life as inevitable (p. 24). Similar to the dialectical nature of the evil *yetzer*, Watson believes the fruits of reason, music, mathematics and art (on the one hand) and greed, pollution and war (on the other) spring from the same source (p. 102). His collapsing of the good-evil distinction, however, can be seen as shrinking inordinately the distance between two moral absolutes. To retain the functional value of social judgments, the good-evil dualism must retain its internal opposition, albeit with dialectical interplay.

Like Watson, Judaism contends that the capacity to do evil is created in all people. Though detection strategies for potential danger have evolved in our species, strategies for deception have also evolved as a part of the ongoing “arms race”. As a corollary, the Talmud comments on the biblical tension between Laban and Jacob. After Rachel warns Jacob about her father Laban’s habits of deception, Jacob responds by saying, “I am his equal in the ability to deceive.” The Talmud asks, “Where did Jacob learn to be so

crafty?” The answer given is, “when dealing with the evil *yetzer* [of Laban], one [Jacob] must be wily, too” (Megilah 13B).

Conclusion

During the past two centuries, the gap between what science and religion claim as truth has grown to become a wide chasm. The purpose of this paper has been to begin bridging that chasm by demonstrating how Judaism deals with the nature of human sexual instinct. In this regard, Judaic texts utilize the construct *yetzer*, a dialectically operating, bio-theological image fittingly construed as proto-scientific.

Religious stories and rituals have been ubiquitous in human civilizations. Evolutionary science continues to have the task of studying the great array of religious sentiments and activities, looking to identify those culture-specific expressions consonant with biological theory. A major milestone in the process lies in understanding that all religions are not the same in their depiction of human nature.

In his popular book, Daniel Dennett suggests that evolutionary scientists be on the sharp lookout for areas of conflict between science and religion (p. 515). This paper is suggesting the opposite approach; that it would better serve both science and religion to seek possible areas of intersection. Evolutionary science lessens its influence as overarching theory in direct proportion to its compulsion to dismiss or trivialize the pervasive behavioral category called “religion”. A research program will produce more valuable results by identifying those aspects of religion not in conflict with and even complimentary to the natural sciences. The picture painted of scientific thinking locked in a battle to the death with religion is, in our time, unnecessary and simplistic. Our goal in evolutionary psychology should be the accommodation, whenever possible, of religious culture and biological theory. Understanding Judaism’s *yetzer* as a bio-theological construct is an attempt to make headway in that direction.

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