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My Friends,

All of the Jewish holidays are celebrations of commemorations of historical events or connected to the agricultural cycle of the land of Israel. Rosh Ha-Shanah commemorates the creation of the world on that day. Shabbat was set as the holy day of rest every week, because God rested on the seventh day when the creation of the world was complete. Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot are connected to the Exodus from Egypt as well as to the agricultural cycles of the land. Chanukah and Purim were set as holidays to commemorate historical events.

The one and only exception is the holy day we observe today—Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. This is the holiest of all days on the Jewish calendar. The Rabbis called it “the Sabbath of Sabbaths”, yet its focus is upon **us** and our imperfections as human beings.

All human beings were gifted with free will. This allows us to make many choices that impact our day-to-day lives. We have so many choices to make daily that we often don't even pay attention to the fact that we are making choices. From the moment we wake up in the morning, we choose the kind of toothbrush and toothpaste that

we use. We select the brand of shampoo with which we wash our hair. We select clothes to wear; we choose what to eat, and so forth. Throughout the days we choose how to spend our free time, what to read, what music we listen to, what hobbies we have and more.

If I were to ask each of you why you are here today, I believe most of you would say, “I made the choice to come to Temple for Yom Kippur. No one forced me to come. I could have done many other things today instead of spending time at synagogue. I chose to come here to deal with our human shortcomings”.

Our Jewish tradition teaches us that two forces are at work within us, and they shape the choices that we make. One of these is our desire to do what is good; the other is our desire to do what is evil. The Rabbis called the inclination to do evil **yetzer ha-ra**. **Yetzer** is the Hebrew word for impulse. The word **ra** is Hebrew for “evil”. The impulse to do what is good is called, **yetzer ha-tov**, and **tov** is the Hebrew word for “good”.

Neither of these two impulses is innately good or bad. They are simply a naturally-occurring part of human nature. Can a person be wholly evil or wholly righteous? They can be according to rabbinic

archetypes. I imagine that someone such as Adolph Hitler comes as close to the rabbinic imagination of what a totally evil person must look like.

In the Talmud the rabbis mention the tradition of totally righteous people. According to tradition, there are thirty-six wholly righteous people in the world at any given time. In Hebrew they are referred to as ***lamed-vav tzadikim***. The numeric equivalent to the Hebrew letter ***lamed*** is thirty, and the letter ***vav*** equals six. Thus, together they are thirty-six. According to this tradition, this number of totally righteous people is fixed, and cannot vary from generation to generation. When one dies, another is born to take his place. Even these thirty-six do not know that they themselves are members of this exclusive group. In the eyes of the Rabbis, the entire world exists because of the righteous deeds of these thirty-six.

Unlike the rabbinic ideal of righteousness, the vast majority of us do not live our lives to either extreme. It seems to me that we actually need both poles—the inclination to good **and** the inclination to evil. I imagine we would not be here today if each person in the world was totally evil. By the same token, if each person in the world was totally

good, we would have no yardstick against which to measure our accomplishments, and no motivation to strive to do our best. It has even been suggested that the evil inclination in each of us contributes to our creativity and our daring to take risks to achieve our goals.

The kind of person each of us becomes depends upon how we handle and balance these two impulses. Negotiating this tension between the good inclination and the evil inclination is precisely the purpose of Yom Kippur.

A Hassidic story tells of a man who came to his rabbi and asked, “Rabbi, is it permissible to lie?” “No”, answered the rabbi. “Rabbi, is it permissible to lie on Yom Kippur?” “Of course not!” said the rabbi. “Then I cannot say the central prayers of Yom Kippur, the short confessional and the long confessional.” The rabbi was puzzled and he asked the person to explain his statement. The man said, “I read the list of sins that we confess, and there are so many of these sins which have never committed. If I confess to them I will be lying to God!”

The rabbi responded, “You did not read the list of sins carefully enough. It is not in the singular, but rather in the plural. It does not say, ‘**I** have sinned’ but rather ‘**we** have sinned’. We confess on Yom

Kippur as a community some of us may have done some of these bad deeds, and other of us may have done others. The list represents the sins of the entire community.”

Among the list of sins in the *vidui* the confessional we find,
the sin we have committed against You in our thoughts,
the sin we have committed against You with our words,
the sin we have committed against You by disrespect for parents
and teachers,
the sin we have committed against You by speaking slander.”

If we reflect on the nature of these sins, they are all a result of poor choices on our part. We could have made the choice not to do these things.

Yom Kippur is all about taking responsibility for our deeds. When we make choices in life, we must carefully weigh the potential consequences of our actions. Hopefully this will help us to make the right choices. Just as Adonai is forgiving of us, so must we be forgiving of others and, and ask others for their forgiveness.

In this season of atonement, may we be resolved to strive to make good choices and to be forgiving of others and ourselves.

“V'al kulam, Eloha selichot, slach lanu, m'chal lanu, kaper lanu.”

For all our transgressions, God of forgiveness, forgive us, pardon us, bring us close to You.”

Amen, Keyn Y'hi Ratzon!