

AN URGE TO BE EVEN BETTER

by Rabbi Label Lam

It is not in heaven...(Devarim 30:11)

The Torah is not found amongst those who think they have reached the heavens. (The Kotzker Rebbe)

They make him take an oath to be righteous and not to be wicked. Even if the whole world says you are righteous you should be in your eyes like one who is wicked. (Talmud Nida)

Don't consider yourself wicked! (Pirke Avos Chap. 2)

I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse; and you should choose life...(Devarim 30:19)

With Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur bearing down upon us it's hard to know how to see ourselves. There even seems to be some mixed signals coming from the sagely sources. Am I good or am I bad? Let's try a few approaches!

A friend of mine tried to call me up Erev Rosh Hashana and apparently misdialed. A woman with a heavy Russian accent answered the phone. Not recognizing the voice, he asked, "Is this the Lam residence?" She answered sternly, "I am afraid you are a mistake?" Of course she misspoke but he called me moments later and told me he felt a little devastated. He hadn't realized he was a mistake. There's a world of practical difference between understanding "I made a mistake" and feeling "I am a mistake".

A few weeks ago my older boys were lightly teasing and testing their youngest sister at the table. One quizzed her strongly asking, "Are you good or bad? She shot back without hesitation, "Both!" They pressed her again, "Good or bad? Which one?" She wouldn't be intimidated a bit. She answered with a single word again, "Both!" How profound was that exchange!

I once asked the famous psychiatrist and author Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski if he could give me a working definition of "positive self-esteem". Without hesitation he said, "Knowing your good points and your bad points simultaneously." At first it sounded remarkably simple but later gained appreciation for its depth.

I realized that seeing only good points makes us haughty while seeing only bad points leaves us vulnerable to depression. Seeing them alternately puts us on an emotional rollercoaster ride. Being aware of both simultaneously creates a healthy balance. We can neither become too high on ourselves considering our faults nor too low when we know our goodness.

Having that healthy balance allows us to face our failures and faults without fear of feeling like a mistake. Then we can enjoy the benefits of criticism that help make the good better and the bad a little less so. Wondering aloud, "Are we good or bad?" I guess the smart answer is "both". As the "days of awe" draw near, though, some may begin to feel an urge to be even better. Text Copyright © 2004 by Rabbi Label Lam and **Torah.org**.