

CHAPTER 3: MISHNA 1: PART 3

by Rabbi Shaya Karlinsky

We are taught in Berachoth (5a): Rebbe Levi bar Nachmani said in the name of Reish Lakish: A person should always provoke the yetzer hatov (good inclination) [to do battle] against the yetzer harah, as it is written "Tremble, and sin not" (Tehillim 4:5). (The word for "tremble" in the text is "rigzu," which has a root similar to the word which means to provoke and make angry.) If the yetzer harah leaves him alone, well and good. If it doesn't, he should involve himself in Torah, as it is written (ibid.) "...introspect...". If it leaves him alone, well and good. If not, he should recite Kriyath Shmah, as it is written (ibid.) "...upon your bed..." (alluding to the Shmah, which is recited before sleeping each night). If it leaves him alone, well and good. If not, he should remind himself of the day of death, as it is written (ibid.) "be completely still, selah" (alluding to death).

The explanation of this section is as follows. A person is always supposed to work to have his yetzer hatov overpower his yetzer harah. If his yetzer harah is so strong that he can't prevail over it, then he should recite Kriyath Shmah. The reason for this is that Kriyath Shmah is the declaration of the unity of G-d, while the yetzer harah, which stands in opposition to the yetzer hatov, has power over man only through the existence of a duality of forces. With the establishment of the absolute unity of G-d, no force can exist which deviates from the Divine will. It is for this reason that at the end of days, when "G-d will be [recognized as] One, and His Name will be One," the yetzer harah will be completely eliminated. (See Sukkah 52a, where we are taught that at the end of days G-d will bring the yetzer harah and slaughter it.) The yetzer harah exists due to the [perceived] fragmentation of reality, while the unity of G-d eliminates any deviation from that unity.

If the recital of Kriyath Shmah doesn't work to neutralize the yetzer harah, since in this material world there is a duality of forces, and it will only be at the end of days that the yetzer harah will be eliminated, then a person should involve himself in Torah [study]. The reason this can be effective is that Torah is the complete emancipation from the yetzer harah, and the yetzer harah cannot exert any control within a system of Torah. This principle is extracted from the verse "... (and the script was) engraved on the tablets" (Shemoth 32:16), from which the Rabbis made a drasha "Don't read it as 'engraved' ('charuth,' which is way the word is pronounced), but rather read it as 'emancipated' ('heiruth', which is spelled the same way, and means freedom from the Angel of Death)" (Avoth Ch.6, Mishna 3). And we are taught that the Angel of Death is the yetzer harah. (See T.B. Avodah Zarah 5a and Bava Bathra 16a.) Torah is such an elevated reality that the power of the yetzer harah cannot impact upon it. (See Kiddushin 30b about the power of the yetzer harah and the remedies to

counteract that power.)

We have explained a number of times (see our comments on the Maharal's introduction to Derech Chaim) that the yetzer harah, as represented by the "satan" can only attach itself to the material dimension of existence. But the Torah is freedom from this deficiency which exists in the physical creation, and is the essence of emancipation. Therefore, man is advised to involve himself in Torah.

(We have mentioned before that the yetzer harah is caused by in man's insecurities, which are a product of his material dimension and physicality. It is exactly this physicality, which is finite, that is the source of death. It is the attempt to escape from this limitation which enables the yetzer harah to drive man to compulsive behaviors. Man's spiritual dimension is not limited by any physicality, and it is not vulnerable to the yetzer harah and the Angel of Death. When man's existence is built on the Torah, living his life in a spiritual dimension, he transcends the limitations of his physicality, and he can insulate himself from the destructive forces of the yetzer harah. This does not mean that man doesn't operate in the material world. Rather, every interaction with the material world is perceived as a spiritual activity. This neutralizes the insecurities that grow out of the limits of his physical existence, which is the source of the power of the yetzer harah.,)

If his involvement in Torah does not work in alleviating the yetzer harah, because the drives of the yetzer harah are exerting such a strong control on him through his physicality, he should remind himself of the day of his death, when he will return to dust. The primary goal of the yetzer harah is bring man to sin, causing him to be banished from the world, and when man is focused on the day of his death, the yetzer harah leaves him alone. As we have explained before (see our explanation to Ch. 2 Mishna 2, especially parts 2-3, and what we wrote in part 1 of this Mishna) the yetzer harah is the force of destruction attempting to bring man to a state of non-existence. Man is susceptible to this force specifically when he feels that he has a stable and accomplished existence. This arrogance is exactly what triggers the quest of the yetzer harah to banish him to a state non-existence. When man is conscious of the day of his death, aware of the tenuous nature of his existence, then the yetzer harah's power is weakened, since there is no stable existence to attack and undermine. King David is the paradigm of one with a complete lack of any arrogance (as evidenced in so many of the chapters in Tehillim), and we are taught (Avodah Zarah 4b) that King David's sin with Batsheva was not part of his nature, as it is written "...and my heart has died within me," indicating that the yetzer harah was not expected to have any control over him. (Rashi explains that the "heart" is representative of his desires and yetzer harah, and its "death" implies King David's complete ability to control it.)

We are taught to contemplate three things in order that we not come to the hands of sin. When one sees that he has come from a putrefied drop, he realizes that man's origin lacks any importance. When one sees to where he is going, ending in a place of dirt, maggots and worms, he realizes that his end also has no significance. When his origin has no significance, and his conclusion is of no importance, his arrogance is completely eliminated. If he had a dimension of importance in his origin,

even if his conclusion lacked importance; or if his conclusion was one of significance, even if his origin lacked any significance; in either case the person could have a feeling of self-importance and arrogance (creating an environment conducive to the yetzer harah). But since both his origin and his conclusion are states of insignificance, the yetzer harah is eliminated completely. The yetzer harah exists only when the person considers himself a creation of independent importance.

You should not make the mistake of thinking that the realization of man's insignificance as a putrefied seed should lead to him to despair of any positive accomplishments. The opposite is true. Rather than being discouraged from doing mitzvot, this realization can motivate him to elevate himself from his lowly origins and transform himself into a creation of importance by doing mitzvot.

We see clearly in these words of the Maharal that the recognition of one's insignificant origin and conclusion in no way contradicts the need for man to have high self-esteem. The "feeling of importance" that the Maharal views as such a negative force refers to human arrogance. When a person realizes that his entire existence is built on his responsibilities to fulfill his unique role in the Divine plan, and this is the foundation of his existence, this creates humility while building tremendous self-esteem. What could be more important than being a major player in the Divine plan! Under these circumstances, there is no room for the yetzer harah to divert man into destructive activities.)

When King David writes (Tehillim 51:7) "Behold in iniquity was I fashioned, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (implying that man's innate nature is one tending to lust and sin) this is not a justification to sin, but rather an apology and explanation for having sinned. Since his nature is a material one, rooted in lust, man is susceptible to sin, and it is proper for G-d not to be too exacting in judgement. But this material nature is certainly not a justification to allow sin. Rather, it should motivate him to elevate himself and not remain in such a lowly state.

Similarly, when Iyov says (Iyov 14:1) "Man, born of woman, has a short life, filled with anxiety..." his intention is to mitigate the strictness of G-d's judgment if and when man sins, but certainly not to present a justification for man to sin, Heaven forbid. Rather, he was praying that G-d would not exact strict judgment for man's sins, given man's inherent limitations.

Contemplating the three things taught in the Mishna will save us from the yetzer harah, which is the cause and source of sin. If we are insulated from the yetzer harah, the natural result is that there is no sinful activity. The intention of "From where did you come? From a putrefied drop. To where are you going? To a place of dirt, maggots and worms," refers to man's physical dimension, where the yetzer harah resides and which seeks sin. Therefore, when man contemplates the fact that this physical dimension, which is the source of the yetzer harah, has no real importance, the yetzer harah will evaporate. It is true that man will ultimately stand before G-d and give an accounting (implying that man's existence has significance and staying power) but this is only at the time of the resurrection of the dead. While man's body lives, the origin of that life is from a putrefied drop

(implying no enduring significance to the physical dimension of man).

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