

HOW TO DEFEAT YOUR YETZER HARA

by Rabbi Yisroel Roll

I am currently treating three male teenage clients, each grappling with a form of anxiety:

Client 1 is eighteen years old. He is an intelligent yeshivah *bachur* who has thoughts of inadequacy and unworthiness. These thoughts are so ubiquitous that they plague him almost every waking hour. His inner dialogue is constantly telling him that others are better than him, learn better than him, and are making fun of him.

Client 2 is a fifteen-year-old yeshivah student who is thinking "non-Torah" thoughts. He thinks he is a bad person and not fit to be in yeshivah.

Client 3 is a seventeen-year-old yeshivah day school student who has lost confidence in his ability to succeed at school. He "used to be successful" but the pressure is "getting to him."

In all three cases I use a Gestalt therapy technique where I review the respective client's personality strengths, as outlined in the self-esteem wheel above. I ask the client to focus on these positive strengths and to think positively about himself based on these abilities. I ask him to find within himself the place where his finest, warmest, most caring feelings are centered. This is the core of his essential or highest *neshamah* self.

It is amazing how a person can change his mood just by consciously thinking positive thoughts. It is the creation of a positive mind-set through mind control.

I then ask the client: what percentage of time do you access your positive self? The numbers vary between 10 to 50 percent of the day. I then ask the client to place his negative thoughts in the empty chair in front of him and to have his positive self-talk to the negative thoughts that are now in the chair. The Positive Self is the client's *yetzer hatov*. The Negative Self is the client's *yetzer hara*. The Positive Self might say: You are getting me down, so please leave me alone.

I then ask the client to get up and move into the other chair and answer as if he was now the *yetzer hara*. The Negative Self would then answer: No way. I am part of you, and I am not leaving.

Positive Self: But you are not helping me. Why do you insist on criticizing me?

Negative Self: I am protecting you.

Positive Self: I don't call putting me down "protection."

Negative Self: By criticizing you I am keeping you humble. I don't want you to get a swelled head.

Then I come in and help the client construct an argument against the *yetzer hara*'s claims.

Positive Self: Listen. You are expressing my negative thoughts — which come from you, my *yetzer hara*. You are a messenger from Hashem, just as my *yetzer hatov* is a messenger from Hashem. And I want to remind you that if you want to give me rebuke, you have to follow the halachic guidelines — just like I have to. When giving rebuke, you have to give it in a constructive way — a way that can be heard and accepted by the recipient. And I have news for you: until now, you have *not* been speaking to me in accordance with halachah. You have been putting me down — and this is not acceptable.

Negative Self: Too bad!

Positive Self: Wrong again. You are a *malach*, a messenger, and a representative of Hashem. And this will not do. Either you speak to me in accordance with halachah, or I will have to report you to a Higher Authority.

Negative Self: I didn't realize you felt so strongly about this. I thought that since you've always taken my comments without responding, you liked the way I spoke with you. It is for your own good, you know.

Positive Self: That's enough. It is *not* for my own good. I will not accept this anymore. Do you agree to criticize me with positive language and with constructive encouragement like: You can do this. Just modify your behavior...?

Negative Self: If you insist.

Positive Self: I insist.

Negative Self: Okay, okay. You don't have to get pushy about it....

Now, these types of dialogues with one's own *yetzer hara* vary in content and intensity. You can have this dialogue on your own or have it guided by a *rebbe*, counselor, or therapist. The idea is that you can put the *yetzer hara* in its place by realizing that the *yetzer hara* is not you, but is outside of you. You, the Real You, is the *neshamah*, or choosing self, and it has the power to control your own inner dialogue. This technique gives you a way to identify and deal with these put-downs and to begin controlling them, instead of letting them control you. That is the purpose of therapy. If your head is churning with internal dialogue and turmoil, then the thoughts control you. When you speak them out and analyze them, they become exposed and *you* control them.



The *yetzer hara* has a very bad reputation. It is said about him that he wants to destroy us. This is wrong. In truth, the *yetzer hara* wants us to conquer him, and he is very happy when we defeat him. The source for this idea is in the opening words of the *Akeidah*:

And it was after these things [words] that Hashem tested Avraham...

Rashi: After the words of the *satan*, who was accusing and saying, "Out of the whole feast that Avraham made, he did not offer before You even one bull or one ram." [Hashem] said to him, "Did he make the [banquet for any reason] other than for his son? If I were to say to him, 'Sacrifice him before me,' he would not refrain from doing it." (*Bereishis* 22:1)

The Ramban explains that the purpose of challenge and adversity is to force a person to bring his strengths *min hako'ach el hapo'el* — from potential to actuality. In other words, the job of the *yetzer hara* (which is the *satan*) is to say: "Let us test him so that he can actualize his potential." This is not malicious. It is pushing man to achieve in the world. The *yetzer hara* may set up roadblocks in our path, but he, too, is a *malach*, a messenger of Hashem, and he wants us to overcome the roadblock and grow from the experience.

The Alter explains that the purpose of the *yetzer hara* is *hasagas hatov*, attaining the good. It must be that way, since the *yetzer hara* is dispatched by Hashem, the Source of all-good. Thus, the *yetzer hara* himself testifies that the essence of reality is, ultimately, goodness, even though it might appear otherwise at times. By his actions, the *yetzer hara* is pointing us toward the truth — we just have to do the opposite of what he tells us. In effect, therefore, says the Alter, the *yetzer hara* is really the *yetzer hatov* in disguise.

Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, *zt"l*, in *Michtav Me'Eliyahu* (part 5, p. 469) explains the meaning of the exchange between the angel and Yaakov when the angel was defeated by Yaakov.

The angel said: "*Shalcheini ki alah hashachar* — Let me go, for dawn has broken" (*Bereishis* 32:27).

Rashi comments: "For I must say *shirah* by day..."

Rabbi Dessler says that the purpose of the *yetzer hara* is to be defeated by goodness. Man must use

his free will to choose correctly, thereby revealing the honor of Hashem. Light defeats darkness. When the angel said "for dawn has broken," he meant that his purpose had been fulfilled — he had been defeated by goodness — and the time had come for this to be revealed in the universe. And so, the angel requested, "Let me go to sing that *shirah*." Now that the angel had been defeated there was *Shleimus* in the world, as the Torah says, "And Yaakov arrived *shalem* [whole]" (*Bereishis* 32:18).

This explanation shines new light on our inner dialogue with the *yetzer hara*. It means that we are empowered to engage the *yetzer hara* and overcome him. We are to identify him, find the point he wants us to focus on, and then overcome the test. These tests of the *yetzer hara*, whether they come in the form of negative thoughts, feeling bad about ourselves, or doubting our own abilities, are meant to be dealt with and overcome. These negative thoughts are sent for us to become more self-aware — of our humanity, our weaknesses, and to strengthen us and make us more *shalem*, whole. In essence, we can use the *yetzer hara* to help us grow. The fact that we have a *yetzer hara* does not make us bad. It makes us better *avdei Hashem*.

BRING IT HOME

- We can talk our children and ourselves out of a bad mood by focusing on our strongest character str. Reconnecting with our innate, Godly *middos* and feeling our intrinsic value will change our mood and dispel apathy and depression. This is called getting in touch with our "*neshamah* state."
- When the *yetzer hara* attacks with negative, critical thoughts, defeat those thoughts with a positive dialogue, as outlined in this chapter.
- The *yetzer hara*'s purpose is *hasagas hatov* — to bring out our goodness; It was created to be defeated. Once we realize this, we can empower others and ourselves to access our *yetzer hatov* and defeat the *yetzer hara*.

This essay is an excerpt from Rabbi Roll's book, *Bring out the Best—the Jewish Guide to Building Family Esteem* <http://www.feldheim.com/catalogsearch/result/?q=yisroel+roll>