

OPENING THE DOOR TO AVEIRAH

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden G-d has said, "You shall neither eat of it nor touch it, lest you die." The serpent said to the woman, "You will not certainly die."

Be'er Yosef - It is a remarkable way for Chavah (and us!) to meet the yetzer hora (in the form of the primordial nachash) for the first time. Thousands of years and much familiarity later, we do not find his presence in the company of humans surprising, and yet we are still taken aback by his brazenness and arrogance. How does it make sense that he should say, effectively, "Disregard what G-d told you. I'm telling you that you will not die?!" How does he expect intelligent humans to take him seriously? Moreover, why was his ploy so successful?

A comment by the Dubno Maggid, guides us to some understanding. Later in our parshah, HKBH admonishes Kayin. "If you improve yourself, you will be forgiven. But if you do not improve yourself, sin crouches at the door."² The Maggid attests that he heard the Vilna Gaon explain that Hashem told Kayin that the yetzer hora has no chance of success when we shut the door firmly in front of him. It is only because we leave it open - albeit, sometimes, through only the smallest crack - that he is able to widen it, establish a beachhead, and launch an offensive from it that leads to his eventual victory.

The crack that we are talking about is one of safek - of doubt whether or not to transgress. We can lean heavily in the direction of compliance with halachah, but if we entertain the slightest doubt about whether we might possibly sin, we might very well find ourselves in the end accepting the "minority report." To best the yetzer hora, overwhelming commitment just isn't good enough. It's not even close. Anything less than absolute, undiluted resolve not to sin results in a dangerous game of chicken. When we play it, too often we lose.

This is what Hashem conveyed to Kayin: The yetzer hora crouches at the door, waiting for you to open it the slightest amount. Your best strategy for dealing with it is to keep it sealed shut entirely.

Chavah's undoing was in not following this strategy. Responding to the rather innocent query of the nachash, she spoke of her determination to listen to Hashem's instruction regarding the Tree of Knowledge. She affirmed the danger in being insubordinate, and the consequences of such folly. "He told us not to eat, pen/ lest we die." Now this is not what Hashem told them. His version was more ominous: "On the day you eat from it, you will certainly die!" Chavah's paraphrase substituted "lest you die" for "you will certainly die."

Chavah's reformulation was a tad less absolute than Hashem's articulation. It betrayed a slight doubt about the consequences of sin. She opened the door to consider options other than obedience. In the end, she was no match for the wiles of the skilled nachash, who was able to countermand G-d, and tell her that she would certainly not die. The details are not so important. What we need to know is that it was the crack in the door that doomed her.

The gemara³ finds another important lesson in Chavah's dialogue with the nachash. While Hashem had told Adam not to eat from the tree, she embellished the command by adding that they were not even to touch it. The nachash pushed her into the tree, without apparent ill effect. He was then able to say, "You see, there is nothing dangerous in touching it. Neither will there be in actually eating of its fruit."

The gemara pithily concludes, "Whoever adds, detracts." The choice of the word "detract" is puzzling. By adding to Hashem's actual instruction, Chavah did not simply "detract" from His commandment - implying that some of it was heeded and some was not - but completely negated it. Following our approach, however, we readily understand what Chazal meant. By adding words, by trying to improve on the original rather than accept them as they were, Chavah detracted from the absolute certainty of Hashem's instruction. She introduced the slightest element of doubt, of the possibility of not listening to what He commanded. The rest, alas, is the sadness of human history.

Sources:

1. Based on Be'er Yosef, Bereishis 3:3-4
 2. 4:7
 3. Sanhedrin 29A
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