

THE BATTLE OF OUR LIVES

by Rabbi Label Lam

When you go out to war against your enemy...(Devarim 21:10)

The Torah only speaks versus the yetzer hara- the negative inclination...(Rashi)

While still an unmarried yeshiva man I started learning with a friend the classic ethical work Mesilas Yesharim- The Path of the Just by Moshe Chaim Luzzato. Right before the semester was to end we reached a line in the book that baffled us. We closed the cover for the summer break with a big question mark hovering overhead. Describing the human condition, he writes, "In truth a man is placed in the midst of a raging battle, since all things in this world whether good or not are tests for the man." We wondered aloud, "What war? If we would ask "the man in the street" if he's aware of the "raging battle" he might accuse us of being paranoid fools.

A few days later four of us were in the Delaware River in two canoes. After passing the rough rapids, the river became wide and seemingly still, so we decided to treat ourselves. We pulled the canoes onto a flat gray slab of rock and jumped into the now calm lake like waters for a swim.

There I was floating on my back, soaking up the warm rays of the sun, and reveling in the experience. I shouted to the others, "Hey guys, this is great! We gotta come back here again!" I waited for some response. I soon realized that they were gone. Where were the canoes? Where's that flat gray rock that was there moments ago? That could not have moved. I began to realize, as I was treading water, that the current had pulled me far down stream.

So, I started to swim back. It was not easy at all. The subtle imperceptible force of the river that had carried me so far so fast was now weighing heavily against me. It took a Herculean effort and it left me drained just to get back to where I had once been.

Weeks later, when we reopened the books, the lesson became clear. Why does that "raging war" seem to be the stuff of fiction? Perhaps, the reason is because so many are so often floating blissfully unaware going with the flow down stream. However, when we make any simple effort to improve, to change our direction, the weight of the river, the inertia of a lifetime of habits and attitudes are bearing down dissuading and discouraging us. Only with a determined will and great effort can we recover old ideals and then hope to move swimmingly beyond.

The Chovos HaLevavos-Duties of the Heart tells an apocryphal story about a certain pious man that confronted some soldiers returning with the spoils of war after vanquishing their enemy in a fierce

battle. He told them, "Now that you are returning victorious from the small battle, get ready for the big battle." They asked him in great wonderment, "Which big battle?" He answered them, "The battle with your self!"

As we prepare to weigh in for another "new year" it would be nice to think that all the effort and striving we have invested in the last many months have left us somewhat improved. We hope we have not yielded sacred ground in what we may to realize is nothing less than the battle of our lives.

Have a good Shabbos

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