

THE BATTLE OF EVERYDAY

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"And Yaakov was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn." [32:25]

Jewish sources teach that two forces struggle within each of us - the Yetzer HaTov, the good inclination (what we might term our "conscience"), is locked in a constant battle with the Yetzer HaRa, the bad inclination. Our Sages explain that the "man" locked in battle with Yaakov was the spiritual guardian of Esav - and just as Esav was Yaakov's physical adversary, his guardian is our spiritual adversary, our evil inclination.

The Avnei Nezer offers a profound insight into the Yetzer HaRa, based upon a Talmudic passage which discusses its battle with Yaakov. On Chulin 91a, two Rabbis argue about the physical form which was given to this spiritual force. One opinion is that the Yetzer HaRa looked like an idol worshipper, while the second opinion was just the opposite - the Yetzer HaRa looked like a great scholar!

The Avnei Nezer justifies both opinions. Sometimes, he says, the Yetzer HaRa comes to us like an idolator, someone diametrically opposed to Judaism and to doing that which is morally correct. The idolator tells us to ignore Jewish values, ignore our consciences, and to sin - straight out.

Sometimes, however, the same Yetzer HaRa comes to us dressed like a scholar. It tries to explain to us how doing a particular transgression isn't merely OK - it's a Mitzvah! To give one possible example, someone who feels wronged by a particular businessman will often feel that he or she has a Mitzvah to warn others not to get ripped off - thus leading to a violation of the laws of Lashon Hara, evil speech. This is the Yetzer HaRa dressed in scholar's garb, offering great justifications for immoral acts.

At the beginning of the parsha, Yaakov prays: "Rescue me please from the hand of my brother, the hand of Esav." [32:12] Commentators (the Bais HaLevi, Aznayim LaTorah, and others) explain that Yaakov's prayer dealt with two possibilities - he asked to be saved whether Esav came as his loving brother, or as the wicked Esav. We need to think the same way regarding the corresponding spritual force: we need to beware of the Yetzer Hara, whether it comes to us looking like an idol worshipper, or like a scholar!