

# THE MINIMUM DAILY REQUIREMENT OF AVODAH

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

## The Minimum Daily Requirement of Avodah <sup>1</sup>

A day in which a Jew does not perform a single act of *chesed* is not a day. So writes the *Shaloh HaKadosh*. We can find an allusion to this in a verse in Tehilim(52:3): *Chesed Kel kol hayom* <sup>2</sup>. *Chesed* occupies so important a position, that should a day go by without participating in it, one cannot say that he has lived it in a meaningful manner.

The *Saba Kadisha* of Slonim expressed a similar, and perhaps parallel, thought - a day in which a Jew does nothing to anger the *yetzer hora* is not a proper day. Should a Jew let an entire day pass without focusing attention on ways in which to subjugate and break the force within him that works to seduce him to evil, he cannot be said to have lived that day Jewishly.

Taken together, the two thoughts become one. There is no such thing as a day without its own goals, without being productive. Furthermore, such productivity must contain elements of the two chief forms of *avodah*: *sur mera* - escaping evil - and *aseh tov* - affirmative embrace of good. Battling the *yetzer hora* on some front, and performance of *chesed* from the minimum daily requirement of a day utilized properly.

Subjecting our lives to a Torah accounting, it is frightening to note how many of our days pass, empty of all significance, as if these days had been snatched away from our lives, leaving a gaping hole of emptiness in the passing of our personal time. Each day has its own mission; all missions amount to glorifying and sanctifying His Name.

The beginning of our *parshah* alludes to this, and further amplifies its message. "And it was after *sh'nasayim yamim*."<sup>3</sup> *Sh'nasayim* evokes the word *sheinah*, sleep. Man contemplates his life - the full set of his days, and finds that he has slumbered through so many of them. *Vayachalom Paroh* - *vayachalom* in turn evokes *chalim*, to be strong. The black holes in our lives are not simply cut out of our personal calendars, but inevitably strengthen the Paroh, - the personification of *yetzer hora*.- within us. The twin capacities of evil and good in each of us are locked in a choreographed dance with the *yetzer hora*. When they fail, it rises. The seven skeletal cows devour the strong, healthy ones, and nothing is left to show for them. They leave no imprint behind, nothing to suggest that they ever existed. Unchallenged evil swallows up the good around it, obliterating it without a trace. A corollary of this is that when some remainder of the good we have done does survive, it is a sure

sign that we had to have tamed our *yetzer hora* in the process, or the good would have vanished.

What should the "comprehending and wise person"<sup>4</sup> do to weaken the *yetzer hora*? The *Saba Kadisha* of Slonim taught us what would not work. We cannot battle it in the realm of ideas, with intellectual parrying. The *yetzer hora* takes up residence in our very life force. We must resist it with action<sup>5</sup>, not arguments.

Our *parshah* provides the paradigm for saving in the good times for the lean times. Hashem allows us good times of clarity. We also experience times of spiritual murkiness and paralysis. During our good times, when Hashem assists us in discovering new facets of truths, it is not enough to bask in the warmth of the illumination we feel. It is imperative for us to save for the lean years when that clarity is not available. We do this by moving from thought and contemplation to firm action, which pierces the armor of the *yetzer hora* and leaves it weaker, even during the leaner times when Divine assistance seems to be less available to us. Chazal tell us<sup>6</sup> that a person's actions need be greater than his wisdom for his wisdom to endure. We insure a lasting place for our wisdom by opposing the *yetzer hora* with positive actions that counter its agenda, and vitiate its power. To achieve our daily minimum of some *chesed* activity joined with focused *yetzer hora* opposition, i.e. acting contrary to the desires of our hearts, we are forced to actively involve our *chochmah*. The action, in turn, puts our *chochmah* on a firm footing.

Chazal<sup>7</sup> tell us that the food that the Egyptians stored up rotted. This, too, may allude to our theme. Storing up moments of enlightenment within us may be pointless. The good will all come to naught, if not converted to action that subjugates and weakens the *yetzer hora*. People can labor for a lifetime without ever attending to this. Without a strategy to counter it directly, people can pass through this life with their *yetzer hora* unscathed, as potent as when it was placed within them.

Our *parshah* warns us that we cannot allow this to happen. We must commit ourselves to a sustained, frontal attack on the *yetzer hora* that relentlessly weakens and subjugates it.

<sup>1</sup> Based on Nesivos Shalom, pg 264-265

<sup>2</sup> Reading it as "G-dly chesed each and every day."

<sup>3</sup> Lit. two years

<sup>4</sup> A phrase from our *parshah* referring to Yosef, the foil of Paraoah

<sup>5</sup> The Rebbe does not mean action of the kind that is mandated by Shulchan Aruch. This becomes apparent later on when he talks about people who can live all their days without ever weakening their *yetzer hora*, and it seems as if he is speaking about committed Jews who follow halachah. Rather, he means individually tailored actions that oppose the messages of *taavah* that are tailor-made for us by the *yetzer hora* unique to our individual personalities. The Rebbe cannot provide

detail, because all of us are different. What we share is that each of us are plagued with different demons within our yetzer hora. They must be listened to, understood, and directly opposed.

<sup>6</sup> Avos 3:9

<sup>7</sup> Bereishis Rabbah 91:5

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