

YETZER HARA - FRIEND OR FOE?

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

To go to battle with mankind's all-time most-wanted enemy, and to emerge victorious. No less than this was the feat of Yaakov Avinu, who, in this week's Sidrah, encounters the Yetzer Hara himself - the angel who challenges us to exercise our free-will to choose good, and entices us to sin. All night they wrestled, the Yetzer Hara surely using his most powerful arsenal of seduction, temptation and desire, but to no avail. Towards daybreak, he was forced to admit defeat - Yaakov had the better of him.

"Now you must let me go, as day is breaking and my time has come to sing shirah (song) before Hashem!"

"First," said Yaakov, "bless me." "You don't understand," said the angel, "in all my years of existence - from the day I was created by Hashem until now - I have never once had the opportunity to sing shirah. Now, finally my time has come - so please let me go and offer songs of praise before my Creator!" (Chullin 91b) In the end, Yaakov refused to release the angel until he had blessed him.

It's hard to not find the angel's excuse somewhat suspect: For thousands of years the yetzer hara had existed (he first appears as the snake in the Garden of Eden), yet his one-and-only time to sing shira just happened to coincide with his defeat at the hands of Yaakov? Is this a matter of miraculous coincidence? (It brings to mind the many times that - unaccountably - students seem to need to leave the class at the precise moment that their teacher asks them to repeat what they have just learned...)

Assuming, as it seems from the above Gemara, that an angel gets only one chance to offer his song before Hashem, when does that time come? We must preface that angels are the faithful delegates and messengers of Hashem - they are given specific tasks to perform. Logically, there seems no more appropriate time for an angel to sing shirah than at the point when he has accomplished his mission. It is at this point that the angel reaches the pinnacle of his existence - and the joy and bliss of having done so allows and inspires him to offer his one-and-only song before his Creator.

There is a common misconception that the yetzer hara is an "evil angel" - one to be hated and despised. In fact, the opposite is true. The purpose of the yetzer hara - which we perceive as our frail side and our propensity to evil - is to provide us with the opportunity to exercise free will, and choose "good" and "life" in the face of temptation and immorality. Without temptation, the choice of good would be axiomatic. The yetzer hara does battle with our emotions not because he ultimately

desires that we succumb, but rather so that we strengthen our commitment to Torah by overcoming the hurdles placed in front of us. When we conquer our desires, thereby coming one step closer to perfection, not only do we not "foil" the yetzer hara - we bring him joy!

The ultimate completion of the yetzer hara's mission could never be realized until he succeeded in creating the "perfect man," an individual so morally and spiritually robust that no temptation in the world could possibly cause him to sin. In Yaakov Avinu, the yetzer hara had, so to speak, met his match. After an all-night battle, Yaakov demonstrated that he had complete and total control over his emotions and desires. He took hold of the yetzer hara - now Yaakov was boss.

"Send me off," said the yetzer hara, "this is a time of great joy for me, and I must go and sing shirah to Hashem. My mission has been accomplished - I have succeeded in perfecting man!" [R' Yisrael of Koznitz, the "Koznitzer Maggid"]

Upon reflection, this concept, says R' Yitzchak Shmelkes (the Beis Yitzchak), can be a source of great inspiration. If - upon finding ourselves in the throngs of temptation - we remind ourselves that the very angel, the "yetzer hara," who is responsible for giving us our perverse feelings and desires, actually wants us to reject his overtures and overcome our temptation, it becomes much easier to do so. Picture the yetzer hara watching you - cheering you on - to make use of an opportunity to exercise free-will and choose good. Imagine, then, if we goof - if we succumb to our desires and sin. "You fool!" exclaims the yetzer hara, "How could you?! You totally missed the point! I never actually intended that you should sin - I was just trying to give you an opportunity for spiritual growth and self-perfection!"

The Mishnah (Sanhedrin 29a) rules that when a beis-din (court of Jewish law) accepts testimony regarding capital offenses, it is necessary to first "intimidate the witnesses" in order to impress upon them the severity of false testimony. "What," asks the Gemara (ibid.) "do we tell the witnesses [in order to intimidate them]?"

Rav Yehudah said: We tell them the following (Mishlei/Proverbs 25:14), "Clouds and wind, but no rain - a man who takes pride in a dishonest gift." Procuring monetary gain by testifying falsely causes famine, so that even if clouds fill the skies and winds blow, rain will not fall.

Rava said: The witnesses can retort, "There may be a seven-year famine - but it never enters the craftsman's door!" Our craftsmanship will sustain us - even in times of famine.

Rather, said Rava, we tell them this (Mishlei ibid. verse 18), "A club, a sword, and a sharp arrow - a man who bears false witness against his fellow." False testimony causes widespread death to occur.

Rav Ashi said: The witnesses can say, "There may be a seven-year plague - but no man dies before his time!"

Rather, Rav Ashi said, Nassan bar Mar Zutra told me, we tell them: [Know that] false witnesses are detestable - even in the eyes of those who hire them [to testify falsely]! Indeed, it is written

[regarding Queen Izevel, who came up with the plan to hire witnesses to testify falsely that Navos the Yizr'eili deserved the death penalty, in order that her husband, the wicked King Achav, could confiscate his beautiful vineyard,] (1 M'lachim/Kings 21:10), "And let them place two corrupt men opposite him, and let them testify [falsely] about him..." In this verse, the perjurers are referred as "corrupt" by the very people who hire them!

Understanding that you are looked down upon and scorned by the very people who entice you to do wrong, says Rav Ashi (and this indeed is the Gemara's conclusion), is the ultimate deterrent. Having a truer understanding of what the yetzer hara is all about - and how he looks at us - is a powerful tool in overcoming the tests and temptations of day-to-day life.

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