

# LEARNING FROM THE ENEMY—IT'S A STEAL!

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

*If a man shall steal an ox, or a sheep, and kill it, or sell it; he shall restore five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep. (21:37)*

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai said: The Omnipresent had compassion over the dignity of His creations! For an ox, which walks on its own, and its thief was not humiliated by having to carry it on his shoulders, he pays five oxen. But for a sheep, which the thief carries on his shoulders, he pays only four sheep, since he was humiliated. Rabbi Meir said: Come and see how great is the power of work! For an ox, which causes (its owner) loss of work, the thief pays five. But for a sheep, through which there is no loss of work, he pays only four. [Rashi; Bava Kamma 79b]

R' Yochanan and R' Meir offer two possible reasons why the thief pays more for stealing-and-killing/selling an ox than a sheep. R' Yochanan understands that the thief's humiliation in snatching a sheep is cause to go easy on him. R' Meir sees loss-of-work as the principle question; where labour is lost, the animal's owner must be compensated to a greater extent.

Upon reflection, it appears that R' Yochanan views the repayment of four and five times the amount stolen primarily as a punishment to the thief. When he stole a sheep, through which he underwent some degree of embarrassment, we consider him to have already received a partial penalty, and we deduct one animal from his repayment. R' Meir sees the multi-animal payment primarily as compensation to the victim. In the case of the ox, the victim has suffered more due to loss-of-work, and therefore deserves additional restitution. (Apparently, R' Yochanan would claim that five- times is the standard penalty; when dealing with a sheep, we compensate by deducting the thief for his shame. R' Meir holds that four-times is standard; when dealing with an ox, we must add to the payment to compensate for loss-of-labour.)

Hopefully none of us will ever have to deal with this halacha outside of the cozy confines of the beis medrash. Perhaps, though, we can glean some insight from this Tannaic dispute into day-to-day life.

Rabbi Meshulam Zusya of Anipoli zt"l used to say he learned seven things from a thief: 1) He works quietly and stealthily without others knowing. 2) He is ready to place himself in danger to attain his goals. 3) He pays great attention to even the smallest detail. 4) He puts all his energy into his work. 5) Alertness. 6) He is confident and optimistic. 7) If he does not succeed at first, he keeps trying and never gives up. [Ha'yom Yom p. 107] (R' Mendel Futerfas zt"l, who spent many years imprisoned in Siberia for his outreach activities, once said that this was only because R' Zusya never sat in prison.

Had he been in prison, he would have learned thousands of things from thieves! More about R' Mendel later.)

*From my enemies You have made me wise (Tehillim/Psalms 119:98).*

There is much to be learned regarding how we serve Hashem by observing the work of our enemies, particularly the enemy from within; the yetzer hara.

There is no greater thief than that inner thief. He robs us of our time, our peace of mind, our goals, our closeness to Hashem. When we consider the consistency with which he works, the energy he expends to make us sin, and the creativity he uses, we should be inspired to harness our own energy, consistency, and creativity to better serve our Maker. [Kedushas Levi, Haggada shel Pesach]

In this itself there are two possible approaches. The standard approach goes something like, "Look how hard the yetzer hara works to entice me to sin! No matter how many times I refuse, he never gets frustrated; I can win the 'battle' a thousand times, and then, out of nowhere, I succumb to sin, even after thinking I was already immune!" One then finds a parallel area in his own life where he/she has not persisted with the same degree of relentlessness (there are no shortage). "If the yetzer hara keeps at it until he succeeds—then so will I!" We thus derive renewed energy and enthusiasm—from our enemy—with which to resume our end of the battle.

The other way to look at it would be this: "Why is it that there are so many areas in my life in which I experience no struggle? I'm never too lazy to play sports, read a good novel... (fill in your favourite activity). But when it comes to studying Torah, davening... (fill in your greatest struggles) I always get so tired and listless?"

Why does our yetzer hara allow us to accomplish some tasks so effortlessly, and others seem close to impossible? By observing the things the yetzer hara makes it hardest to do, we gain insight into what's really important, and what's incidental. Generally, things that come without effort or struggle are not what matter the most. That's why he doesn't bother distracting us; in fact, the easier, the better, as we will continually be drawn to the things that come easiest. Areas in our avodas Hashem that we find particularly difficult arouse the question: Why is this mitzvah different from all other mitzvos? It can only be that the great value of that particular mitzvah make it worthwhile for the yetzer hara to focus his energies there.

Perhaps this offers us hidden understanding into R' Yochanan's and R' Meir's points-of-view. The 'thief' symbolizes the yetzer hara. Each Tanna demonstrates how much we can learn from him. R' Yochanan focuses on him: "Look at the embarrassment and humiliation he was willing to suffer just to accomplish his goal!" R' Meir looks at it from the victim's vantage point: "Look at what he made me lose!" They both agree: From my enemies You have made me wise!

Back to R' Mendel. R' Mendel was a fiery chassid and the spiritual director of a yeshiva in Eretz Yisrael. He used to say that from everything he heard and saw in the six years he was in Siberia, he

tried to learn a lesson in serving Hashem.

One prisoner used to relate that he had been a deep-sea diver in the Czar's navy, now imprisoned by the Communists. His story went as follows: "It occasionally happened that one of the ships of the Czar's navy would sink, sometimes because of a storm at sea, or because it struck a rock, or sometimes in battle.

"Ships are worth a lot of money; just the metal and the equipment alone were often worth millions. So the navy developed a means to lift the ship from the ocean floor so it could be towed to shore and fixed, or at least partially salvaged. That's where I came in.

"They would situate two towing-ships on the sea above the location of the sunken ship. Each ship would lower a long, thick chain with a huge hook on the end, and I would dive down, attach one hook to the front, and the other to the rear of the sunken ship. Then the towing-ships would reel in their chains, lift the sunken ship from the ocean floor, and tow it to shore.

"This was all fine when the sunken ship had been under water for less than a month. But after that the ship began to rust, and the hooks would bring up only huge chunks of iron, leaving the rest of the ship behind. So someone developed a brilliant idea. Instead of lowering just one chain, the tugboats would spread a huge, hollow, rubber mat with thick rubber walls over the place where the sunken ship lay. Inside the entire length of the mat was a large flat sheet of steel with several hundred steel ropes attached to it. The ropes ran through special airtight holes in the lower rubber wall in a way that no water could get in and no air would escape. At the end of each dangling rope was a hook.

"My job was to go down with a few other divers, lower the mat, spread it over the sunken ship, and attach the hooks to as many places as possible. A motor on one of the two tugboats would pump air into the mat and slowly inflate it. It began to pull upwards until— suddenly—the entire ship lifted at once and could be towed to dry land."

"You know how I understand the story?" said Rav Mendel. "The sunken ship is the Jewish people—rusty and falling apart from almost two thousand years of exile. We are the deep-sea divers. We have to try our best to attach a hook to every single Jew. When enough hooks are attached... Hashem will pull us all up together!"

*Have a good Shabbos.* Text Copyright © 2006 by [Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann](#) and **[Torah.org](#)**