

THE YETZER HARA: BODY AND SOUL

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

"Korach the son of Yitzhar . . . took [himself to one side] . . . (Bamidbar 16:1)

Korach was bad news from the start. The Midrash seems to indicate that even before the exodus, back in Egypt, he was already up to no good. It seems from the Midrash that it was only a matter of time before Korach led a rebellion against Moshe Rabbeinu, and God for that matter.

Yet, there is secret mischief and then there is overt self-destruction. There is subtly trying to improve one's political status in life, and then there is outright rebellion, coup d'état, acts of insurrection that completely put a person's future at great risk. With respect to the rest of the nations of the world, this might be justified. With respect to the Jewish nation, especially at that time of history, it begs the question: What in the world was Korach thinking?

Rashi provides one approach to Korach's mindset at the time, upon which the Arizal elaborates in Sha'ar HaGilgulim. Nevertheless, even if Korach had a vision that deluded him into thinking he was destined for a higher position of leadership, there had to have been something wrong with his way of thinking to allow him to be so deluded. Without question, his yetzer hara had gotten the best of him, as it has so many others throughout the history of man, including each one of us.

It has been said, "We have seen the enemy and it is us." This is certainly true with respect to the yetzer hara, at least since it moved into man after the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Originally it was in the form of a snake, outside of man. As a result of the first man's sin, it was absorbed into mankind, becoming what the Arizal calls the "ba'al habayis," the "master of the house." The yetzer hara's wish is often our command.

What exactly is the yetzer hara, where does it "live," and how does it work? To answer that question we must first understand the body-soul relationship, beginning with the following from the Talmud.

Antoninus said to Rebi: "The body and the soul can both free themselves from judgment. The body can plead, 'The soul has sinned, [the proof being] that from the day it left me I lie like a dumb stone in the grave [powerless to do anything].' The soul can say, 'The body has sinned, [the proof being] that from the day I departed from it I fly about in the air like a bird [and commit no sin].' "

He answered, "I will give you a parable. To what may this be compared? To a human king who owned a beautiful orchard which contained splendid figs. He appointed two watchmen over it, one who was lame and the other who was blind. [One day] the lame man said to the blind person, 'I see

beautiful figs in the orchard. Come and put me on your shoulders so we can take and eat them.' So the lame man rode upon the blind man, and they took them and ate them. Sometime after the owner of the orchard returned and asked, 'Where are those beautiful figs?' The lame man answered, 'Do I have feet with which to walk?' The blind man said, 'Do I have eyes with which to see?' What did [the owner] do? He placed the lame man upon the blind man and judged them together. So will God [on the Day of Judgment] bring the soul and place it in the body [again] and judge them together." (Sanhedrin 91a)

This simple parable is both profound and extremely instructive about life in this world. The relationship, and therefore the responsibility, of the soul to the body is very similar to that of a parent's relationship and responsibility to his or her child.

On their own children may act recklessly, but they will hardly be faulted for their behavior because of their age. Parents on their own, however, will act responsibly knowing that should they not, they will be taken to task for their improper behavior. When they come together an emotional tug of war ensues. Children try and pull their parents in their direction, looking only to have fun. Parents try and "convince" their children to not interfere with their need to accomplish meaningful things with their time, energy, and resources.

Sometimes the child "wins." Usually the parents win. And on the best of occasions a compromise results that works fine for both of them. This allows the child to have some fun along the way as a reward for acting mature enough to allow the parent to accomplish his or her agenda. Everyone is happy.

Once the child learns that he can work with his parent, that he can afford to make sacrifices to his ultimate benefit, he will not be afraid to make more of them. He will learn the value of self-sacrifice and grow up along the way, maturing one day into an adult as well.

It is not very different between the body and the soul. The Torah states:

God smelled the sweet savor, and God said in His heart, "I will not again curse the ground anymore for man's sake, for the imagination of the heart of man [is] evil from his youth." (Bereishis 8:21:)

To whom was God referring when He made this historical declaration, and what did He mean by it? He meant that the body's natural inclination is towards the non-spiritual, towards that which makes it physically comfortable. It came from the physical and therefore it is inclined towards the physical world, like a child.

This had not always been the case. Prior to the sin of eating from the Aitz HaDa'as Tov v'Ra, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, man's inclination was only to serve God, soul and body:

... When Adam sinned, however, this was greatly altered. The amount of evil that existed initially was just enough to assure that man would be in a perfect balance, allowing him to gain perfection through his own efforts. When man sinned, he caused evil to increase, both in himself and in all of

Creation, and as a result, it became much more difficult for him to achieve this good. (Derech Hashem 1:3:7:8)

What changed? The process to change was complicated, but the net result was basic, though very fundamental. Until the sin, the yetzer hara was external to man and the body acted like a well-trained child, always ready to do the will of the soul. The path to perfection had been straight and short.

However, after the sin, which was also multi-stepped, man absorbed the yetzer hara into him:

Therefore the Children of Israel do not eat the Gid Hanashe . . . (Bereishis 32:33)

Why is it called Gid Hanashe? It is the tendon that causes those who eat it to forget about the service of God, because that is where the yetzer hara dwells [and from where it emanates to the rest of the body, all the way to the left side of the heart b'sod, "the heart of the fool to his left"]. (Koheles 10:2)]. (Zohar, Vayishlach 170b)

This was a complete game-changer for man and history. It is the difference between having an enemy in front of us and spy amongst us. The enemy before us does not disguise his nationality and purpose, and therefore it is easy to remain ready and defensive against him. The spy, however, pretends to be one of us, leaving us vulnerable to his actions.

Rav Alexandri on concluding his prayer used to add the following: "Master of the Universe, it is known full well to You that our will is to perform Your will. What prevents us? The 'yeast' in the 'dough' and being subject to foreign powers." (Brochos 17a)

The Kabbalistic process that made this possible is described as follows:

There isn't a soul in the world that does not have a "clothing" of "encasement" from the impurity of the snake. This encasement is the mystical basis of the yetzer hara that enters a person when he is born; as a result of Adam HaRishon's sin the yetzer hara became rooted in and clings to a person. From the time that Adam HaRishon sinned, the two of them, the encasement and the soul, are almost like one dough made from flour and bran completely mixed together. Why does the yetzer hara have such ability to make a person lean in the direction of evil? Because he is a complete master of the house in the body of a person. (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Ch. 23)

Putting all of this together and applying it to the parent-child analogy, it is as if the child has brought a friend into the picture, a bad influence. How bad? This bad:

Shimon ben Levi said: "Every day the yetzer of a man strengthens itself seeking to kill him . . . If The Holy One, Blessed is He, did not help him, he would not prevail. (Kiddushin 30b)

And, if he doesn't kill him directly then he does it indirectly, but pushing him to use life's opportunities in a meaningless manner. As my Rosh HaYeshivah used to tell us, "Wasting time is partial suicide." So, when the Talmud states that "a person only sins when a spirit of insanity enters

him" (Sotah 3a), it is referring to the yetzer hara and its death-causing antics vis-a-vis our bodies' wanton desires.

Ultimately the battle is about priorities in life. Both the child and the parent want to be happy. It's just that what is often important to the child can be unimportant to the parent and vice-versa, and therefore their approaches to happiness are different from one another.

This is true about the child outside of us and inside of us, as the Talmud indicates:

In the time to come The Holy One, Blessed is He, will bring the yetzer hara and slaughter it in the presence of the righteous and the wicked. To the righteous it will have the appearance of a towering hill, and to the wicked it will have the appearance of a hair thread. Both the former and the latter will cry. The righteous will cry saying, "How were we able to overcome such a towering hill!" The wicked also will cry saying, "How is it that we were unable to conquer this hair thread!" (Succah 52a)

How can the yetzer hara have a different appearance to both the righteous and the evil? If a person's approach to life is to avoid moral responsibility then any obligation to do the moral thing will appear difficult at best and insurmountable at worst. The opposite is true of the righteous individual. Since his peace of mind depends upon acting morally, obstacles along his path to moral perfection will appear as unimportant, and at worst, as challenges to be overcome, as it says:

For a righteous man falls seven times and rises again, but the wicked stumble in time of calamity. (Mishlei 24:16)

It is the strategy of the yetzer hara to attack the person on the level of his priorities, to make what is important to God unimportant to the person and what is unimportant to God important to the person. Once it has brought the person to this level of "insanity," sin will then occur frequently and quite "naturally."

At the end of the day, then, it seems as if the soul is right in its defense: it really is the body's fault, at least since we absorbed the yetzer hara into us. As a result of Adam HaRishon's sin, the cards are stacked against it. Should the soul not be free of any culpability from the sins of the body?

That's like asking, "Should a parent not be free of blame for any evil his or her child does?" The answer, of course, is that it depends. When a child's inappropriate actions cannot be traced back to a failure of the parent to educate and refine his or her child, the parent does not bear responsibility. If a child's negative actions, however, are clearly the result of a parent's lack of effort to correctly educate the child, the parent will bear direct responsibility for such behavior. The same is true of the soul on Judgment Day with respect to the body in which it lived, which is why the Talmud also says:

The Holy One, Blessed is He, says to the Jewish people: "I created the yetzer hara, and I created Torah as its spice. If you involve yourselves in Torah then you will not fall prey to it." (Kiddushin 30b)

This means that if we are clever, we can still walk a path to personal rectification even after being

taken hostage by the yetzer hara. Through Torah a person can educate and spiritually refine his body and make it more soul-like, reducing its vulnerability to the scheming and machinations of the yetzer hara, a.k.a. the Satan:

Reish Lakish said: Satan, the yetzer hara, and the Angel of Death are all one. (Bava Basra 16a)

The cleverness, however, is not just in realizing this and becoming involved in Torah learning to win the battle of life. It is also about being clever with respect to one's Torah learning. As history has shown, many a great Torah scholar has fallen prey to the yetzer hara in one way or another, sometimes because of the Torah he has learned:

The greater the person, the stronger is his yetzer hara. (Succah 52a)

What's the answer? It's in next week's Perceptions, b"H.

Text

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