

BATTLING OUR INNER ENEMY

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Jewish homiletical tradition has dealt with the "enemy," who is being warred against in the opening verse of the parsha, as being the evil instinct of the "warrior" itself. In the immortal words of the famous cartoon character Pogo, "we have met the enemy and they are us!" This is in consonance with the words of the Talmud that the opening topic of the parsha - marriage to the attractive woman, a non-Jewish captive - has specific reference to one's own struggle with the basic desires and evil instincts that bedevil us all.

The true struggle in life is therefore not really against others who may not wish us well as much as it is against our own conflict-torn nature. Temptations, both physical and monetary, and power-driven ambitions abound in our everyday existence. Falsehoods, lame excuses, or the feeling that "everyone does it" and that one will never get caught up and publicly exposed in the scam or scandal are the weapons of the enemy that lurk within us, preying on our built-in weaknesses.

Unless one truly realizes how vulnerable each and every one of us is regarding our internal enemy, there is little hope of creating effective defensive strategies to combat it. The haughty arrogance of unwarranted self-righteousness is one of the most serious moral and personal defects that a person may possess.

This is the message that the Talmud delivers to us when it states that one who sins and yet remains confident that one will later be able to repent and cancel the sin, is never able to truly repent of that sin. One should not underestimate the enemy that lies within us.

The month of Elul traditionally was set aside as a particular time when that internal enemy was to be identified and confronted. In our busy and crowded world, our schedules allow precious little time to think about our true selves - our goals and the purpose of our existence. Our enemy confounds and confuses us with all of the myriad details, pettinesses and distractions that our super busy world inflicts upon us.

Rabbi Yisrael of Salant was once asked if one has only ten minutes a day to study Torah, should one study Talmud or Mussar (the ethical teachings of Judaism.) He answered that one should study Mussar for then he would come to realize that he has much more time than just ten minutes in the day to study Torah. By that Rabbi Yisrael outlined his method of confronting the inner enemy that convinces us that we are unable to improve, that we are too weak or habit-stricken or that we are simply too busy and preoccupied with other issues to think about ourselves.

Ignoring the enemy is the surest way of being defeated by it. I think that tradition placed such an emphasis on the month of Elul, for it is the self-confrontation that this month indicates to us that is the strongest weapon in our spiritual arsenal. In preparation for the days of awe and judgment that are soon upon us, let us use this time wisely and efficiently.

Shabat shalom

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Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com