

## Part 2 – The *Yetzer Hara* (Negative Inclination) can Sometimes be Overwhelming

### 1. The Power of the *Yetzer Hara*

The *Gemara*<sup>1</sup> speaks about the enormous power of the *yeitzer hara*, even with great *Talmidei Chachamim* (Torah scholars):

Some women [who had been redeemed] from captivity were brought to Neharda'ah, put in [the attic inside] the house of Rav Amram the *Chassid*, and the ladder [to the attic] was taken away. As one of the women passed by [the opening], a light shone through that opening [into the house]. Rav Amram took the ladder, which even ten men could not lift, all by himself, and began going up [to the attic]. When he reached the middle of the ladder, he shouted, "There is a fire in the house of Rav Amram!" The Rabbis came there and said, "You have embarrassed us!" He replied to them, "It is better that you should be embarrassed in the house of Amram in this world, and not be embarrassed about him in *Olam Haba!*" [Rav Amram] asked the *yeitzer hara* to leave him, and it left him as a column of fire. [Rav Amram] then said [to the *yeitzer hara*], "Although you are fire and I am only flesh, I am still stronger than you."

Rebbe Meir used to make fun of transgressors [since he thought, as Rashi explains, that one can easily overcome the *yeitzer hara* if one merely desires to do so]. One day, the *Satan* appeared to [Rebbe Meir] as a woman on the other side of a river. There was no ferryboat, so he grabbed onto a rope [which stretched across the river] and began to cross over. When he reached the middle of the rope [i.e., he was halfway across], the *Satan* let him go. [The *Satan* then] said [to Rebbe Meir], "Had they not proclaimed in Heaven to be careful with Rebbe Meir and his Torah, I would have made your life worth two *ma'ah* (i.e., worthless)."

Rebbe Akiva [also] used to make fun of transgressors. One day, the *Satan* appeared to [Rebbe Akiva] as a woman on top of a date palm. He grabbed the palm tree and began going up [to the top]. When he reached the middle of the tree [i.e., he was halfway up], the *Satan* let him go. [The *Satan* then also] said [to Rebbe Akiva], "Had they not proclaimed in Heaven to be careful with Rebbe Akiva and his Torah, I would have made your life worth two *ma'ah* (i.e., worthless)."

Not only do we see here that even great people struggle with the *yeitzer hara*. The implication of this *Gemara* is that they may actually have more protection from transgressing than regular people do.

Even more remarkable, the *Gemara*<sup>2</sup> seems to say that there are some situations where one is actually unable to avoid transgressing. Despite the *Gemara*<sup>3</sup> telling us that "Chananya, Misha'el, and Azariya were all *tzadikim gamurim* (completely righteous)," who were fitting to have a miracle done on their behalf (when they survived being thrown into a fiery furnace rather than bow down to the idol of Nevuchadnezer), nevertheless, the *Gemara*<sup>4</sup> says something remarkable about them:

Had Chananya, Misha'el, and Azariya been tortured [as opposed to being threatened with death], they *would have* bowed down to the idol.

Some *Rishonim*, including the Ramban, and the Rashbah in the name of Rashi, explain that the *Gemara* is not literal, and they never would have actually worshipped an idol. However,

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<sup>1</sup> *Kiddushin* 81a

<sup>2</sup> *Ketubot* 33b

<sup>3</sup> *Ta'anit* 18b

<sup>4</sup> *Ketubot* 33b

we certainly see that torture is very severe, even more so than death. As the *Gemara*<sup>5</sup> itself says, there is no comparison between pain which has an endpoint to pain which has no endpoint.

The *Gemara*<sup>6</sup> tells us that a number of great individuals actually accused G-d of being responsible for transgressions:

And Rebbe Elazar says — Eliyahu flung words upward [towards Hashem], as it says, “And You turned the hearts [of the Jewish nation] backwards.”<sup>7</sup> Rebbe Shmuel bar Rebbe Yitzchak says — From where [do we see] that *HaKadosh Boruch Hu* returned and acknowledged this to Eliyahu? As it says, “and the one [i.e., the Jewish nation] that I [Hashem] *caused* to be evil.”<sup>8</sup>

Rebbe Chama the son of Rebbe Chanina says — Were it not for the following three verses, the feet of the enemies of Yisrael (i.e., the Jewish people) would stumble:

“And the one that I caused to be evil”<sup>9</sup>;

“Behold, like clay in the hand of the potter, the house of Yisrael are also in My hand”<sup>10</sup>;

“And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh, and will give you a heart of flesh.”<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, [Rashi explains,] we now have a justification that Hashem caused us [to transgress], since he created the *yeitzer hara*.

The *Maharsha* points out that the intention of this *Gemara* certainly cannot be that this is a complete claim to being able to get a positive judgment. Hashem created the Torah as an antidote to the *yeitzer hara*<sup>12</sup> and gave *bechira* to man. But rather, without this claim we would stumble completely in judgment. At this point, therefore, mankind has an opening and a small defense, since the *yeitzer hara* caused them to transgress.

The *Ben Yehodaya*<sup>13</sup> explains that without this claim, even *teshuva* wouldn't help. But rather the *nefesh* that transgressed would die. This claim, therefore, causes *teshuva* to work, so that the *nefesh* can receive a *kaparah*.

In the Academy of Rebbe Yannai they said — Moshe said to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, “*Ribono shel Olam* (Master of the Universe), because of the silver and gold that You lavished upon Israel, until they said, ‘enough,’ that is what caused them to make the [Golden] Calf!”

In the Academy of Rebbe Yannai they said — A lion does not roar from a basket of straw, but rather from a basket of meat...

Rebbe Chiya bar Abba said in the name of Rebbe Yochanan — This is like a person who had a son. He bathed him and anointed him, gave him food and drink, hung a purse (full of money) on his neck, and sat him down at the entrance to [a house of] ill repute. What should the son do so that he will not transgress?

Rav Acha the son of Rav Huna said in the name of Rav Sheishis — This is what people say, “Filling the stomach is one of the types of evil, as it says, ‘they became satiated...their hearts became arrogant; therefore, they have forgotten Me.’”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Ketubot* 33b

<sup>6</sup> *Brachot* 31b–32a, Rav Dessler discusses this in *Michtav M’Eliyahu* (4:105-7)

<sup>7</sup> *Melachim Aleph* 18:37

<sup>8</sup> *Michah* 4:6

<sup>9</sup> *Michah* 4:6

<sup>10</sup> *Yirmiyahu* 18:6

<sup>11</sup> *Yechezkel* 36:26

<sup>12</sup> *Kiddushin* 30b

<sup>13</sup> *Yechezkel* 18:4

<sup>14</sup> *Hoshea* 13:6

And the Rabbis say from here — “And he will eat, be satiated, grow fat, and turn [to other gods].”<sup>15</sup>

Rebbe Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of Rebbe Yonasan — From where [do we see] that *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* returned and acknowledged this to Moshe? As it says, “And I increased silver for her (the Jewish people) and gold, but they used it for *Baal* (i.e., an idol).”<sup>16</sup>

The *Maharsha* writes that G-d admitted that this was only a mitigating consideration, not a complete defense.

## 2. There is Even a Point where the Negative Action is No Longer Viewed as Wrong

The *Gemara*<sup>17</sup> discusses a case which is described as *t'chilatah b'onnes v'sofa b'ratzon* — one was initially forced to participate in an act that became willful at the end. The conclusion of the *Gemara* is that *t'chilatah b'onnes v'sofa b'ratzon* is completely exempt. What is the reason? The *yeitzer* clothed (i.e., overwhelmed) the person with desire.

The *Medrash*<sup>18</sup> gives an example of this. If a person dipped his finger into honey and [forcefully] put it into another person's mouth on Yom Kippur, it may be that the coerced person would end up enjoying the taste of the honey.

The point is that the pleasure at the end was a natural reaction to the physical stimulus the person was forced to experience, not an agreed-upon willingness. And the entire focus of the Torah is on choice and will, not on nature and pleasure.<sup>19</sup>

This exemption of “being clothed by the *yeitzer* with desire” is from all penalties, including bringing an offering in the *Beit HaMikdash*. This shows us that there is not even a need for a *kaparah* (atonement) with this normally prohibited action.

Furthermore, the Rambam<sup>20</sup> points out that the logic of this exemption is so clear that it applies to all of *dinei Torah*.

## 3. A Remarkable Ruling with Resisting Temptation and Transgression

The *Gemara*<sup>21</sup> tells us:

Rebbe Abahu says in the name of Rebbe Chanina, “It is better for a person to transgress in private and not profane the Name of Heaven [by doing it] publicly.”

Rebbe Ilai HaZakein says, “If a person sees that his *yeitzer hara* is overpowering him, he should go to a place where no one recognizes him, clothe and wrap himself in black, and do whatever his heart desires, but not profane the Name of Heaven openly.”

Both *Rashi* and *Tosfot* take the *Gemara* at face value — since he is unable to avoid transgressing, it is better that he should do it privately and not profane G-d's Name.

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<sup>15</sup> *Devarim* 31:20

<sup>16</sup> *Hoshea* 2:10

<sup>17</sup> *Ketubot* 51b

<sup>18</sup> *Medrash Rabba, Naso* 9:10

<sup>19</sup> *Peirush Maharazu*

<sup>20</sup> *Hilchot Issurei Biah* 1:9

<sup>21</sup> *Kiddushin* 40a and *Chagiga* 16a

Rabbeinu Chananel disagrees with this and explains that the foreign place and the black clothing will help him to be able to control his desires.

A different *Gemara*,<sup>22</sup> however, tells us that a prominent Torah scholar followed the ruling of Rebbe Ilai HaZakein very literally and had illicit relations even though he had dressed himself in black in the different place:

Rav Yosef says — There were rumors about a particular *talmid chacham* that he had had illicit relations. After a debate, Rav Yehuda put him into *nidui*...After Rav Yehuda died, this *talmid chacham* came to the *Beit Medrash* to try to be released from the *nidui*, but was not successful.

Neither the *Rif* nor the *Rosh pasken* like Rebbe Ilai. Rather, although the *yeitzer* of a person may overpower him, he is still obligated to fight his *yeitzer*, as we see from the *Gemara*<sup>23</sup> — “All is in the hands of Heaven except for the fear of Heaven.”

The *Meiri* writes that anyone who is unable to subdue his *yeitzer* is better off doing [the transgression] in secret and not profaning the name of Heaven publicly...Once one has gone to a place where he is not particular about his personal *kavod* (honor), perhaps this will humble his heart. But if this does not end up humbling him, then at least when he is doing whatever his heart desires, he won't be violating any other *issur*. And, at least, there won't be a *chilul Hashem*, since no one recognizes him.

Rav Elchanan Wasserman<sup>24</sup> says that this is very puzzling, since it appears from the words of Rebbe Ilai that he is arguing on the concept of “All is in the hands of Heaven except for the fear of Heaven.” And yet, this is the *yesod* (foundation) of the entire Torah!

Rav Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin speaks explicitly<sup>25</sup> about a person being unable to avoid transgressing:

A person can sometimes stand in a challenge so great that he will not be able to avoid transgressing, as it says in the *Gemara*<sup>26</sup> [with the *mashal* of the boy who was placed at the entrance to a house of ill repute with a purse of money hung around his neck] — What should that boy do so he will not transgress? In this situation, he will be considered *onnes gamur* (completely exempt) where Hashem will exempt him [from any punishment]. Also, when the incitement of the *yeitzer* is so strong that it cannot be defeated, it is relevant to speak about *onnes* (coercion)...

See the *Gemara*<sup>27</sup> where we [also] say that one is exempt in a case of *t'chilatah b'onnes v'sofa b'ratzon* — the beginning was forced but the end was willful. What is the reason? The *yeitzer* clothed the person with desire... This is considered *onnes gamur* even though it was willful [at the end]. In any case, a *yeitzer* this big would be impossible for a person to control, and would therefore be an *onnes gamur*. There would be no *onesh* (retribution), even if the person did an *issur* (transgression), since it was an *onnes*. But, [Rav Tzadok cautions us], a person is not able to testify about himself with this, since perhaps he did have the strength to control the *yeitzer*.

Rav Tzadok continues:<sup>28</sup>

One who has a great longing for bodily desires should not be saddened by this, thinking how flawed he is, since he has such a strong longing. On the contrary,

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<sup>22</sup> *Moed Katan* 17a

<sup>23</sup> *Brachot* 33b

<sup>24</sup> *Kovetz Maamarim*

<sup>25</sup> *Tzidkat HaTzadik* #43

<sup>26</sup> *Brachot* 31a–32b

<sup>27</sup> *Ketubot* 51b

<sup>28</sup> *Tzidkat HaTzadik* #44

[having such a strong desire shows that] he is a vehicle which is prepared for the greatest love, longing, and pursuit of the truth.

Rav Hutner<sup>29</sup> also discusses *aveirot* which he characterizes as being “beyond a person’s *bechira*.” But even so, based on a *possuk*,<sup>30</sup> it seems that there could be an *onesh* for these types of *aveirot*, which Rav Hutner writes — “is very puzzling.”

He first clarifies that a person will certainly not be punished for *aveirot* beyond his *bechira*. But, similar to what Rav Tzadok says, a person cannot know which *aveirot* fall into this category. And since a person can never be sure that he was truly not responsible, he must do *teshuva* for every *chet*, since the violation may, in fact, have been willful. To not do *teshuva* would express a lack of appreciation for the seriousness of transgression, which would itself be deserving of an *onesh*.

And Rav Avigdor Miller<sup>31</sup> tells us that *bechira* itself can sometimes be removed, in very specific circumstances:

We learn a great fundamental of *bechira* from the *possuk*,<sup>32</sup> “And I will harden the heart of Paro,” plus<sup>33</sup> “And I will strengthen the heart of Paro.” We see that Hashem sometimes removes the power of *bechira* from a person to some degree, even while he is still alive... Here we have a person who is still walking among the living, but in terms of *bechira*, in some aspect, it is like he is already dead. [As an example,] it says in *Pirkei Avot*,<sup>34</sup> “Whoever causes the masses to transgress is not given the opportunity to do *teshuva*.” And there are more examples like this that demonstrate the fundamental that Hashem sometimes removes *bechira* from a person.

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<sup>29</sup> *Pachad Yitzchak, Iggerot u’Ktavim #9*

<sup>30</sup> *Melachim Aleph 8:46*

<sup>31</sup> *Lev Avigdor, Shaar HaBechira — 43*

<sup>32</sup> *Shemot 7:3*

<sup>33</sup> *Shemot 14:4*

<sup>34</sup> *5:21*