

VAESCHANAN (DEUTERONOMY 3:23-7:11)

The Devil Made Me Do It!

2001 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

When G-d created the world, He created a race of humans, not of robots. Sometimes we do the right thing, sometimes the wrong. It is up to us. We are not programmed to do G-d's will. We are TOLD to do G-d's will, but we are given the freewill to ultimately decide for ourselves.

It is a life-long struggle. On the one hand, we are G-d's children, created in His image, with the wish to live a spiritual life. On the other hand, we are physical creatures, with material desires and physical urges. Should I steal that \$100 bill because I want more spending money? Or should I respect G-d's law that I only take that which is legitimately coming to me? Should I eat that delicious, juicy, hamburger smothered in hot, melted cheese because my mouth is watering? Or should I be satisfied with my drab and monotonous peanut butter 'n jelly sandwich? Should I honor my "marriage vows," or should I..., well, you get the picture.

The reason G-d created us with this dichotomy of drives was to make it a challenge to follow His Torah. If everyone automatically always did what is right, there would be no such thing as good and evil. Unless we are tempted to do evil, doing the right thing is no big deal. If we were FORCED to avoid evil, G-d wouldn't reward us for doing it. You don't thank a computer for doing what it was programmed to do. It had no choice. (Although, one sometimes wonders! :-))

Therefore, you have the *Yetzer Tov* and *Yetzer Hara*, the Good Inclination and the Evil Inclination. The *Yetzer Tov*, the Good Inclination, is that drive within us to do the right thing. (Pardon the irreverence, but do you remember from our cartoon-watching days, the soft-spoken fellow with the harp and halo who pops over your shoulder and tells you lovingly that it would be wrong to pull the pigtailed of your classmate sitting in front of you?) The *Yetzer Hara*, the Evil Inclination, draws us in the opposite direction. (The Eddie Haskell-type guy with the horns and pitchfork who tells you to go for it!)

The cartoon analogy aside, we take the battle against the Evil Inclination very seriously. We pray every day that G-d should assist us in waging this never-ending war against OURSELVES. We ask Him to give us the strength to withstand the baser urges in our personalities, and to help us to subjugate our wills to the Commandments of our Father in Heaven. No small task indeed.

The *Yetzer Hara*, the Evil Inclination, seems to be one of the worst enemies we could possibly have. It leads us to pursue ill-gotten gains. It encourages us to lie, cheat, and indulge our every desire and lust. It creates resentment and ill will. If there is one thing in the world that cannot accomplish anything

positive, it would seem to be our Evil Inclination.

Not quite. There is actually a Mitzvah in which our negative drive plays a major supporting role; it is the Mitzvah of loving G-d. Sounds strange, doesn't it?

This week we will read the first paragraph of the "Shema". One of the Mitzvahs in this section is the Mitzvah of loving G-d. "*You will love G-d with all your heart, all your soul, and all your possessions.*" (Deuteronomy, 6:5) The Talmud (Brochos, 54a) observes an unusual spelling for the word "*Levovecha*" – *your heart*. It should actually say "*Lib**cha*," with the letter "*Bet*" occurring once. Instead, the "*Bet*" appears twice, implying, says the Talmud, a Mitzvah to love G-d with your TWO "hearts," the positive heart and the negative one!

It is obvious that one should follow the inclination to do good, thereby demonstrating one's love for G-d and His Mitzvahs. But how do we love G-d with our negative sides? We do it by channeling our negative traits in a positive direction. Sometimes we need to play mental games in order to accomplish what we need to do. Sometimes we may not be able to muster the strength we need to do the right thing for the right reason. In that case, says the Torah, motivate yourself to do the right thing for the WRONG reason!

Let me give you an illustration. Most Americans today are overweight. We see in this week's Torah reading that there is a Mitzvah to safeguard one's health. (Ibid, 4:15) We all know that it's not healthy to overeat. We understand that the Torah requires us to lower our cholesterol and triglycerides. Yet, that third slice of cheesecake beckons. Just as our resolve is about to melt, our deliverance comes from an unlikely place – Vanity to the rescue! Just think how nice it would be to fit into that favorite dress/suit. Don't we want to take our current wardrobe and give it back to Omar-the-Tentmaker?! Remember all those compliments you received from your friends (and jealous enemies!) the last time you were thin?

Now, haven't we always learned that vanity is bad? Isn't it wrong to put so much focus on looking for compliments? Doesn't vanity belong in the realm of the *Yeitzer Hara* – the Evil Inclination? Yes, it does, but in a situation like this, we are fulfilling the Mitzvah of loving G-d "*with all your HEARTS.*" We are directing a negative character trait in a positive direction.

The Torah tells us to use those not-so-positive sides to do good things. If you tend to be lazy, utilize that laziness next time you are tempted to go and do something wrong! Our Sages advise that if someone has violent tendencies, he should channel them toward Mitzvahs by becoming a *Shochet*, a slaughterer of Kosher animals. Are you argumentative? Go to a Torah class and debate matters of Torah philosophy. (Send me an e-mail if you disagree with something you read here!) You want honor and recognition? Give time and money to a charitable institution and be the honoree at their next dinner!

Wait a second! Is that appropriate? Shouldn't we do what we're supposed to do because it's right? Why are we encouraging ulterior motives in the service of G-d? We should do Mitzvahs purely because G-d told us to do them!

That's true in a perfect world. We should do Mitzvahs because it's right to do Mitzvahs. However, G-d is telling us that sometimes we need a push. Sometimes we need an incentive.

Let me ask you a question. Many of us are in "helping professions." We are doctors, dentists, teachers, and rabbis. We strive to serve G-d and humanity by doing our jobs well. Would we go to work if we didn't have the incentive of paycheck at the end of the week?

We are expected to study Torah with the express purpose of learning what G-d expects of us. We are supposed to learn in order to perform Mitzvahs and teach others. What if I am tempted to study so I can receive the honor and respect that is accorded to *Talmidei Chachomim* – Torah scholars? Would I be better off staying home and watching TV?! The Talmud tells us that we should always study Torah even if it's for the wrong reason. As we gather the knowledge and inspiration that Torah study has to offer, we will eventually come to study for the right reason.

A great rabbi (I believe it was Rabbi Velvel Soloveitchik) was asked about this concept. If even negative character traits can be used in the service of G-d, what possible purpose could there be for **heresy**? If one has atheistic feelings, is it possible to channel THAT toward the love of G-d?! The rabbi responded that even heresy and atheism have value. "The next time you see a person in need," he said, "don't wait around with trust in G-d that He will help that person. Be an atheist and help him yourself!"

Have a great Shabbos. Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz