

The Trial by Ordeal: The *Yetzer* and the *Sotah* – Parashah Naso 5782

A chasidic tale is told of people in a town who asked for help against the *yetzer hara*. Their prayer was granted and the *yetzer hara* was handed over to them, but they were warned, “Look out - If you kill this one, the world will be destroyed.” So they tied the *yetzer hara* up for three days. At the end of the three days, when a fresh egg was needed for a sick person, they searched for one in all the land but could not find a single egg. The chickens had stopped laying, people had stopped going to work, nothing was getting done. So what to do? Release it? Should they kill it? If so, they would destroy the world. So they said, “Let us then ask that it be reduced to half size. But no half things are granted by heaven.” So they decided to blind its eyes, which helped somewhat to reduce its strength.¹

What do you think the *yetzer hara* is?

Another story is told in the Talmud of Abbaye, who was one of the outstanding teachers in the Talmud. Abbaye once overheard a man and a woman making arrangements to set out together early in the morning on a journey on foot. Said Abbaye to himself: I shall follow after them in order to keep them from sinning. He followed behind for three miles across meadows. It turned out that as far as the two travelers were concerned it was a very innocent trip. As they reached their destination, Abbaye heard them take leave of each other with harmless civilities: “It was a long way. Our company was pleasant. So long.” Abbaye was rather ashamed, recognizing that he himself could not have travelled with the woman so innocently. “Leaning against a door, he was visibly upset and pained until an old sage came by and taught him: The greater a person, the stronger their *yetzer hara*, their instinctual drive.”²

So now, what do you think this *yetzer* is?

And now, another modern story, from season 4 of *Sex in the City*. Miranda, in her kitchen, has just taken a piece of cake out of her garbage can and eaten it. She calls and leaves a message for her friend Carrie, that she just ate cake out of her garbage, saying to Carrie, “you’ll need to know this for when you check me into the Betty Crocker Clinic.”

¹ BT *Yoma* 69b

² BT *Sukkot* 52a

This too, is a story of the *yetzer hara*. So where do we see the *yetzer hara* arise? What kinds of situations? Thoughts? What does it sound like?

If you are considering that each of these stories point out things like unchecked desire, suspicion and judging others unfavorably, or judging oneself unfavorably, and the emptiness within that no amount of cake can fill, you are getting the sense of the *yetzer hara*.

And now, another story that doesn't look like it at first, but it's another story of the *yetzer hara*. We find this in the story of the *sotah*, which appears in this week's parashah, *Naso*. The *sotah* is a woman who is suspected by her husband of infidelity. The Torah describes the procedure for judging her innocence or guilt by subjecting her to a physical test – she is taken before the priest, and she drinks a muddy water into which the priest has rubbed into it the name of God. If she has a reaction to drinking this water, she is considered guilty. If not, she is unharmed.

When I first heard this story, I thought, this is not fair! Humiliating! Sexist! I now know that this procedure was only done for a short time, and was no longer done, but the description remains in the Torah, here today, for us to wrestle with.

When I considered this story further, I realized that the woman would never have a reaction to drinking this water – she will pass this test every time! So why is this ritual, this procedure here? This is a ritual that, though humiliating to the woman, is meant to restore the relationship between her and her jealous husband, this procedure is designed to restore peace. This is essentially an exorcism of jealousy!³

The ritual addresses *his jealousy and distrust* rather than any suspected actions of his wife. What does this jealousy and distrust sound like? The *yetzer hara*.

Yes, this is another example of the *yetzer hara* - arising in the form of jealousy, and the story illustrates the lengths that the Torah goes to resolve it, in order to restore peace – peace in the person's heart, in the relationship, and in the home. *Shalom bayit*, peace in the home, is an important Jewish value, so much so that the priest writes the name of God and dissolves it into the water for the *sotah* ritual.

³ The Five Books of Miriam, by Ellen Frankel, Ph.D., pg 200.

I have three takeaways here on the *yetzer hara*, though you may have more:

1. The *yetzer hara*, when it is out of balance with the *yetzer hatov* – *the good inclination*, then the *yetzer hara* is an inner voice that is not our friend. The voice of the *yetzer hara* says nothing new. It judges and often disparages us and others, it is often afraid, and it can also convince us to not do things that we should do, and do things we should not. We can discover the *yetzer hara* through the four “C’s” that we should not do: complain, compare, condemn, and catastrophize. When we see these at work, that’s a big clue that our *yetzer hara* is running the show. One of the greatest tools in battling the *yetzer hara* is first, restraint. Don’t eat the cake out of the garbage. Don’t assume the worst. Don’t judge others harshly. Judge yourself and others favorably.
2. Our Torah gives us many rules – and we have choice to follow them or not. These are given based on a fundamental understanding of human beings, which is that we can and do change, we can improve ourselves, we are not fixed in our ways. We have the capacity to learn and grow throughout our entire lives. We have stories about wrestling with our *yetzer hara* because it is part of the human experience, and we can recognize it and grow from our wrestling.
3. We are a hopeful people. The national anthem of Israel is *HaTikvah*, The Hope. We are perpetually hopeful, even in the face of a world that says otherwise, and our task in this world is to improve the world and make it better. We can start with ourselves, to our families and our work, our communities, and out into our world. If you have called someone to check on them, or brought someone a meal or some soup when they’re not feeling well, or taught someone to read, don’t let your *yetzer hara* minimize or disparage the good you have done. Rather, acknowledge that each mitzvah you do, large or small, improves the world.

Remember, give yourself some credit. That’s one way to battle the *yetzer hara*.

Shabbat shalom!

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