

The Battle Within

This is a Shabbat unlike any other. Israeli rabbis have told Jewish citizens to keep their phones on and answer them when someone calls. Rav Hershel Schachter said that it would even be correct to recite the prayer Avinu Malkenu (Our Father, Our King). We don't even say this prayer on Yom Kippur if it happens to land on Shabbat, except at Neilah, the most desperate time at the end of Yom Kippur. But in this wartime situation it is as though we are constantly at that desperate moment.

I don't know what it means, but as I deliver this message [on Shabbat morning], the United States [will be/is being] graced with a total solar eclipse. The very day when we read about the great luminaries. This decade began with dramatic signs that the Kingdom is near, and it is only seeming more and more imminent.

I hate to speak about such things on Shabbos, but the news headlines this week seem to have come right out of the tochachah—Moses' warning about the terrors that would befall his people at the end of days. I'll admit that as we read those words in Deuteronomy a few weeks ago, I felt twinges of doubt that such a grotesque situation could even be possible in the modern era.

We've seen how dark and depraved humans can be. We've also seen shining examples of heroism, generosity, self-sacrifice, and an unprecedented level of unity. The duality of humanity is on full display.

In 1 Corinthians 12:26 Paul taught that if one part of the body suffers, all the parts suffer with it. The Rambam says in his laws of Repentance (3:11) that a Jewish person who does not take part in the hardships the community is facing does not have a portion in the world to come. We feel this pain. If you are numb to it, you need to evaluate your connection to the body.

The Israeli military and government and people have a long, arduous task ahead to restore security and achieve peace. There are wounded people to care for, homes to rebuild, orphans to raise. And here across the ocean we find ourselves engaged in battles of public opinion, knowing that the moment of moral clarity our society experienced last week has already begun to evaporate.

Yet it is important for us to realize that none of this is new. We know from history that when Yeshua was a small boy and his family made the pilgrimage from Nazareth in Galilee to the Holy City of Jerusalem for Passover, its gates were lined with Roman crosses bearing the corpses of crucified Jews.

This violent scene encapsulates the Israel that Yeshua knew his whole life; it has been repeated in every generation throughout Jewish history. This unceasing pattern should lead us to an essential realization: even if our wildest dreams were to come true in our current struggle—if Hamas were to surrender unconditionally today, if our hostages were rescued, if its leadership were dismantled—this would not be the end. Within a short time, another enemy, another oppressor, more violent, more sadistic, more satanic, would take their place.

Because if you think the problem is Hamas, or Palestinians, or Iran, or Arabs, or Muslims, or your political opponents, you are missing the big picture. Our Master taught us that there is only one remedy for the sickness that plagues our world. Seek first the kingdom of God. We need Mashiach now.

Don't get me wrong; we live in the real world. We have to rescue hostages, we have to shoot down incoming missiles, we even have to mobilize politically when necessary. But we cannot rely on these

avenues to solve the bigger problem. The world needs redemption. The world needs Yeshua our King Messiah. Israelis need the Kingdom. Americans need the Kingdom. Palestinians need the Kingdom.

And this realization draws attention to the importance of the path we are forging at Beth Immanuel and in the Messianic Jewish world. Our Master Yeshua taught us how to get from here to there. As Hashem told the prophet Zechariah, “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit” (Zechariah 4:6).

As you may recall, we have been slowly making our way through a list found in 2 Peter chapter 1, a set of steps that he says leads us to the entrance to the eternal Kingdom.

As I pondered this list, I noticed a certain pattern that has held true so far at least. That the middot, the attributes that Shimon Baryona listed for us, are each a hint of the Messianic Kingdom. His starting point is faith—the awareness that God not only exists but is intimately involved in our world; that he is a God who intervenes and redeems. This faith is a foretaste of the messianic era. How tangible and acute will this awareness be for everyone when his kingdom is revealed!

He tells us to supplement our faith with virtue. What is virtue? In our earlier discussion I showed that this term describes the concept of a good heart. Again, the Torah promises that a component of the redemption will be the circumcision of the heart, and that he will remove the stony heart from within us and give us a heart of flesh, and that he will write the Torah on our hearts.

And then we learned about knowledge: knowing God. In the Messianic future, we will be subsumed in the knowledge of God like the water of the sea.

The steps on Peter’s list seem to be preparing us for future realities—for experiences that will be common in the Messianic Kingdom.

Today, I would like to focus on the next attribute, the next breadcrumb leading us to the gates of the kingdom. Shimon Keifa told us to supplement our knowledge with “self-control.” What comes to mind when I say, “self-control”? Maybe it means not eating the whole “sharing size” bag of M&Ms in one sitting. Or perhaps it means stopping after one episode and not binge-watching a whole season of some TV show. Sure, those are some examples of self-control. But is self-control really a foretaste of the Messianic Kingdom? It’s an amazing foretaste, and I will show you what I mean.

It will help if we put the term “self-control” in the language of the Sages. The Hebrew term for self-control is כיבוש היצר (kibbush hayetzer), which can literally be translated as “conquering the inclination.”

In Pirkei Avot, Ben Zoma taught, “Who is mighty? [Who is truly strong?] One who conquers his inclination, as it is said (Proverbs 16:32), ‘One who is slow to anger is better than a mighty man, and one who rules over his spirit [is better] than the conqueror of a city.’”

What is this yetzer or inclination?

Humans are a strange hybrid among God’s creatures. We have two inclinations, two impulses, two drives within us. One is a drive to connect with Hashem, to fulfill his will. The other drive pulls us down to this earth; to self-determination, to gratification. Where did these two drives come from?

This week’s parashah gives us a great opportunity to discover how it all began, in the beginning.

The Fall of Man

Let's consider how we humans were expelled from the Garden of Eden.

Genesis 2:7 describes how God formed an "adam" out of the ground:

Then Hashem, God formed the man [adam] of dust from the ground [adamah] and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man [adam] became a living creature. (Gen. 2:7 ESV)

We often translate *adam* as "man" or "person," but this fails to capture connection to the word *adamah*, which means dirt. So going forward, I'm going to translate *adam* as "dirtling."

A few verses later, verse 17, God prohibits the dirtling from eating the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

We might expect to see more discussion about this tree, but suddenly the narrative diverts to a new topic. In verse 18, it is immediately recognized that the dirtling needs a partner. So, in verse 19, God forms animals out of the ground, and I want to draw your attention to how similar this verse is to verse 7 that described the formation of humans:

Now out of the ground [adamah] Hashem God had formed every *beast of the field* and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every *living creature*, that was its name. (Gen. 2:19 ESV)

Both man and beasts are formed out of the ground, and both are called a *nefesh chayah*, a living creature.

In the next verse, the dirtling proceeds to name all livestock and birds and every *beast of the field*. Pay attention to this term: *chayat hasadeh*, beast of the field. The dirtling swipes left on each one, finding no suitable partner. This raises the question: Did not Hashem already know that the dirtling would not find a partner among the beasts of the field? What was the point of this whole exercise?

But the search for a partner continues with verse 21. God puts the dirtling to sleep, and removes one of his structural components. Some translations say a "rib," but the term is more often used in an architectural context. In verse 22, instead of saying that God *formed* the woman (like it says about man and animals) it tells us that God "constructed" or "built" the woman and brought her to the dirtling. She becomes the first creature not to be formed from dirt.

In verse 25, it tells us that the two are naked, *arumim*, a word that means "exposed" or "unveiled." And in the next verse, 3:1 the snake is introduced and called the most clever of every beast of the field, of every *chayat hasadeh*. The word for the snake's sneaky cleverness here is the same word used before to mean "naked." Why does the Torah intentionally describe the snake in the same way as the humans? What connection is it drawing? Also, note how the snake is called a *chayat hasadeh*, a beast of the field, alluding back to the animals that were rejected as partners.

Both in Jewish and Christian interpretation the snake is more than just a snake. We identify it as an embodiment of the satan or the yetzer hara, the evil inclination. But let's set that aside for a moment. The Torah does not tell us that the satan took the form of a snake. In real time, within the narrative, we have no hint that this is anything but a snake, an animal, a beast of the field.

But the snake proceeds to tempt the woman, who, by the way has no name yet. He promises that eating from the tree will cause their eyes to be open and make them like God.

From contextual perspective that this is just a snake and nothing more, this is strange. Why would a snake do such a thing? What does it stand to gain from the fall of man?

As we know, the dirtling and the woman eat from the tree and are punished. The snake is cursed to crawl on its belly. I always thought it was kind of unfair to punish snakes for this, if it was really just the satan in disguise, who doesn't have a bodily form at all and doesn't actually suffer from the fact that snakes crawl on the ground. But it implies that snakes at one point had limbs, they were more humanlike than they are now. We might ask: what is the nature of these specific punishments? How do they address the problem of the first sin?

Finally, once the dust has settled, Dirtling finally gives the woman a name. Her name is Chavah, which is a variation on *chayah*, the word that means "beast." Why did it take until now for Chavah to receive her name? And of all the names, why should she be called something akin to "beast"?

I once read a compelling interpretation of this story by Rabbi Ari Lamm. The story of the snake addresses a central question: where do dirtlings like us fit into the hierarchy of creation? We are made in the image of God, so are we godlike beings? But we are also formed from the ground, so are we ultimately just another species of animal?

Hashem presented Adam with each of the animals as partners to prove to him that even though he is ultimately a beast formed from the dirt just as they are, he is also uniquely made in the image of God, and so transcends their category.

The snake comes as a representative, a spokesman for the rejected partners. As it seems, the snake took personal offense to this rejection and the notion that man is on another level than the rest of the animals. Who do these hairless monkeys think they are? They think they're special? They think they're gods? I will take them down a notch. The snake's tactic was to play into their insecurities. To trick them into debasing themselves.

Rabbi Lamm explains that God's punishments on humanity reinforce the boundary between man and God. They remind Adam and Chavah that they are ultimately from the ground, a part of the natural world. When Adam gave his wife the name Chavah, he was conceding that he and his partner are beasts made from dirt.

And yet we are not mere animals. The punishment on the snake reinforced this distinction. We are uniquely created in the image of God, bearing his likeness. As the Torah tells us, God "breathed into [Adam's] nostrils the breath of life" (Gen. 2:7 ESV) – the *neshamah*. Humans are a strange hybrid creature, combining two natures in one.

We have our flesh, a physical body, with its own physical soul like other animals. On the other hand, we have the spirit, the *neshamah*, the breath of God and his image in us.

In addition to those two natures or components to our makeup, we also have two drives, two forces that pull us in those opposing directions. We have the *yetzer hatov*, which pulls us in the direction of our *neshamah*, in the direction of unity with God. And we have the *yetzer hara*, the impulse that invites us to give into our animal instincts and desires.

So to reiterate: we have two components—flesh and spirit, and we also have two impulses in our hearts pulling us in two directions, the yetzer hara and the yetzer hatov.

There is a hidden hint about this in the verses that describe the formation of man and animals, 2:7 and 2:19. Both verses say that “the LORD God formed...from the ground.” The word for “formed” in both verses is ויצר, *vayitzer*. But in the verse that describes the formation of man, it is spelled with a superfluous letter yod: וייצר, *vayyitzer*. The two yods imply that unlike animals, man has two yetzarim, two inclinations. One toward earth, and one toward heaven.

From this perspective it makes sense why the snake is seen to represent the yetzer hara or the satan. The snake wants us to fail at our mission to bear the image of God in the physical world; it seeks to prove we are unworthy of it. It is calling us to join it, to partner with it, to throw in the towel and completely revert to the level of an animal.

Jewish interpretation tells us that the yetzer hara is no longer the literal animal kingdom or a snake beckoning us to descend to their level. But the animal is now embedded within us, constantly tempting us to forget who we really are.

The Yetzer Hara: What and Why

But why do we even have a yetzer hara? The Midrash tells us a strange thing about it.

Genesis 1:31 says, “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.” Do you know how to say “good” in Hebrew? טוב, *tov*. How do you say “very good”? טוב מאוד, *tov me’od*. In order, it is “good,” “very”. *Tov* = good. *Me’od* = very. *Tov me’od*.

In Kohelet Rabbah 3:11, Nechemyah son of Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman tells us that this verse, “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was *tov me’od*,” is talking about Adam. “*Tov*” is talking about the yetzer hatov, our good inclination. “*Me’od*” is talking about the evil inclination.

The midrash then asks: How can the evil inclination be called “very good”? By definition it is evil, not good! But he responds: This lesson teaches us that if it were not for the yetzer hara, the evil inclination, humans would not build houses. We would not get married. We would not have children. As proof, he cites Ecclesiastes 4:4, which I will read from the Complete Jewish Bible, since I like how it comes across: It says, “I realized that all effort and achievement stem from one person's envy of another” (Eccl. 4:4 CJB).

From this midrash we see that although the yetzer hara can lead us to do evil, the yetzer hara itself is not evil. It is an essential part of our mission as humans. It causes us to care about our life as an individual physical organism. It makes us seek nourishment and safety and reproduction. It gives us a sense of individuality and the illusion of an independent self-existence. This is what makes the space for free will. For free choice to exist, the potential for evil also must exist.

But why free will? Without free will, we cannot be rewarded for our good choices. God wants not just to give us his goodness; he wants to reward us for choosing goodness. Good can be good on its own, but without the potential for evil, there is no such thing as *very* good. Everything God created he called good, but it was only with the creation of man, who has the potential for evil, that something could be called *very* good. An angel is good; it cannot be *very* good. An angel cannot grow or develop. Growing through struggle is the special task of humanity.

This is why God created the yetzer hara. It exists because he wants it to exist. It turns *tov* into *tov me'od*.

Conquering the Yetzer Hara

If the yetzer hara is the *me'od* to our *tov*, then why should we want to conquer it?

Keep in mind that our sages never told us to destroy or eliminate the yetzer hara. We are only called to conquer it. Conquering means taking control. It means ruling, mastering. We subjugate it, using its powerful strength to accomplish our purposes.

In the Shma, which our Master Yeshua called the greatest commandment, Moshe commanded us “Love Hashem your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:5). Sifrei (32:3) and the Mishnah (Berachot 9:5) ask: why does it say with *all* your heart? Not just, “with your heart”? They answer that “with all your heart” means with both inclinations inside your heart. You should love God with your good inclination and your evil inclination.

Rashi points out that this is hinted at by the word for heart, which is spelled in this verse with two beits instead of one: לבב *levav* and not לב *lev*. The letter beit represents a house, a container, a chamber, and the chambers of the heart correspond to the inclinations of man.

If loving God with all your heart means loving him with both inclinations, then what does it mean to love God with all your soul? The sages answer, to love God even if he takes your soul. Even if it costs your life. And what does it mean to love God with all your might? It means “with all your mammon,” with all your money. But wait a second, they ask. What need is there to say anything about money once you have already given up your soul? But the answer is that there are some who value their money even more than their own life.

But I see something even deeper here. To love Hashem with your soul is to say, “I don’t care about my life, I only want you. I am nothing.” This is the kind of love that comes from the yetzer hatov, from the neshamah. But to use your money and your resources in honor of Hashem, this is what it means to enlist your yetzer hara in the love and service of God. And what is the word here for “might”? Love Hashem your God with all of your *me'od*. With your “very.” With the thing that turns *tov* into *tov me'od*.

We do not want to eliminate the yetzer hara. We just need to conquer it. Just as an animal can be domesticated and its power harnessed to perform productive tasks beyond the physical strength of man, the yetzer hara, when properly mastered, can propel your service of God.

Don’t get me wrong, the yetzer hara is an enemy. Your struggle with the yetzer hara will never end; it only gets harder as you progress. You have to constantly be on guard; as soon as you are convinced you have defeated it, it has certainly triumphed. Untamed and uncaged it is a wild beast. It is dangerous. It wants to kill you. It wants to reduce you to an animal and return you to the dust. It tries to accomplish this at every corner and every possibility, from the moment you wake up in the morning and hit the snooze button.

Recognizing its voice

I heard a story about the Chofetz Chaim who had a rough time getting out of bed one cold morning. The yetzer hara came to him and said, “You should give yourself a break. It’s cold. You need your sleep. Stay

in bed—you're an old man!" At that moment the Chofetz Chaim jumped out of bed and shouted, "I may be old, Yetzer Hara, but you are even older, and you have no trouble getting up early!"

This teaches one critical primary strategy when it comes to defeating the yetzer hara: to recognize its voice. If you can begin to discern who it is that is giving you this advice, suddenly the path becomes clear. The voice of the yetzer hara is simply the Torah in backwards speak. In a backhanded way, it testifies to the truth of the Torah. And not only that, but it reveals your specific curriculum and the area of Torah for you to improve. Thus, by correctly identifying the voice of the yetzer hara, you gain an incredible strategic advantage. It's like military intelligence that has deciphered the enemy's secret code, giving it access to all their plans and strategies.

So our first strategy for conquering the yetzer hara is to identify its voice.

Setting Limits

The next strategy I can offer you is to show it who's boss. In Judaism, we do not practice strict asceticism, that's self-denial. In our tradition, the world was created for us to enjoy. Nonetheless, it is important to exercise limits.

Of course, if something is a sin, we must outright forbid it. But there are permissible behaviors that strengthen our yetzer hara. By enforcing limits around those behaviors, it helps us to gain overall control.

It's not a sin to eat, but make it a practice to limit what and how much and when you eat. By doing so, you exercise authority over your yetzer hara. Sometimes you might even fast for spiritual and repentance reasons.

Likewise, it's not a sin to sleep. But make it a practice to control when and how much you sleep.

It's not a sin to speak. But even setting lashon hara, evil speech aside, limiting permitted speech can help you gain control over your yetzer hara.

Again, I'm not talking about severe deprivation, but boundaries. Give it some thought, and I'm sure you can identify a variety of behaviors in your life that are technically permissible but gratify the yetzer hara. By establishing limits, you can get the upper hand.

Study Torah

Psalm 4:5 (verse 4 in Christian Bibles) says, "Be angry, and do not sin; ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent. Selah."

In the Gemara (Berachot 5a), Rabbi Levi bar Chama cites Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish who uses this verse as a prescription for conquering the yetzer hara. "Be angry, and do not sin," means you have to constantly rile up your yetzer hatov against your yetzer hara. Never stop struggling, stay vigilant and fierce against it.

But he advises us that if we start to falter, continue with what the verse says: "Ponder in your heart." This refers to studying Torah. Your yetzer hara putting up a fight? Drag him to the study hall. Force him to listen to some Torah lessons.

In fact, why wait? Keep the Torah in front of your face at all times. Make it a part of your daily routine. And when I say Torah, I don't just mean reading the parashah. Prophets, writings, Gospels, epistles,

midrash, halacha, mussar. I don't really care—it's all Torah, and it is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise. Ponder these things in your heart. Confront your yetzer hara with these truths at all times.

Say the Shema

Still having trouble? The Rabbis advise us to look at what the verse says next. "Be angry, and do not sin; ponder in your own hearts *on your beds*." The phrase "on your beds" alludes to the words in our mouths when we lie down and when we rise up: the Shema. Hear O Israel, Hashem is our God; Hashem is one. If the yetzer hara is still bearing down on you, say the Shema. The sages refer to saying the Shema as accepting the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven. It is our pledge of allegiance, declaring our willing subjection to God's yoke, his rule over us. It is our acceptance of the consequences of sin and righteousness. Cry out to God in prayer, ask him for help, tell him out loud that the yetzer hara is harassing you, and declare your utter dedication to Hashem.

Remember Your End

But if this doesn't work, this verse offers us one more strategy. "ponder in your own hearts on your beds, *and be silent. Selah*." Be silent and remember the day of your death. Your yetzer hara will be defeated; the only question is, will it drag your neshamah down with it? Remember that you will die and will be forced to give an account for your deeds. This sobering realization can give you the leverage you need to defeat the yetzer hara.

The Future

Speaking of the future, the Talmud and midrashim have some strange things to say about the Yetzer Hara and its ultimate destiny.

Zechariah 12:10 is the famous verse that says, "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn. (Zech. 12:10 ESV)

The sages of the Gemara (Sukkah 52a) disagree who it is that they are mourning about at the time of the redemption. According to one opinion, this is the Messiah son of Joseph who is killed. We would certainly favor this reading. But the other opinion says that at the time of the redemption, God will slaughter the yetzer hara. The Gemara objects: Why would people mourn the death of the yetzer hara? They should throw a party!

Rabbi Yehudah answers, at the time the yetzer hara is slaughtered, it will manifest itself and appear to the righteous and the wicked differently. The righteous will see it as a towering mountain, and then we will weep and say, "How were we able to overcome such an enormous obstacle?" To the wicked, the yetzer hara will appear as a strand of hair. They will weep and say, "How were we *unable* to overcome such a tiny strand?"

Keep in mind that we don't have to choose one interpretation or the other of this specific verse. The point the rabbis are making is that Messiah himself will vanquish the yetzer hara in the Messianic era.

How so? It will still be possible to sin in the Messianic era. People will still have children and eat and build houses. If the yetzer hara is what causes us to do these things, how can we say that it is slaughtered?

It's not that the yetzer hara will be eliminated, but it will be fully subjugated. God will be revealed. Truth and righteousness will be obvious. It will no longer be a struggle. But because righteousness will no longer be a struggle, it will also no longer come with reward.

With this perspective we can see how perfectly the trait of self-control, conquering the inclination, envisions the Messianic era. At that time, the yetzer hara will have no power over us.

Today we are facing a war. Let us always remember that the war we are waging is in our hearts. The sages teach us that when the Torah says "Ki tetze lamilchamah" when you go to war against your enemy, this is teaching us about defeating the yetzer hara. "For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds" (2 Cor. 10:3-4).

The world needs Yeshua. The world needs King Messiah. And until that time comes, we should not be shocked to learn that this world is broken. Keep fighting the battle in your heart and keep following the path to the kingdom. Shabbat shalom.