

Thank You my dear יצר הרע!

וירא אלקים את כל אשר עשה והנה טוב מאד

The מדרש tells us something quite remarkable about these words.

רבי נחמן בר שמואל בר נחמן בשם רב שמואל בר נחמן אמר: הנה טוב מאד — זה יצר טוב. והנה טוב מאד — זה יצר רע. וכי יצר הרע טוב מאד? אמתהא! אלא שאלולי יצר הרע, לא בנה אדם בית, ולא נשא אשה, ולא הוליד, ולא נשא ונתן

הנה " says פסוק, רבי שמואל בר נחמן, in the name of רבי נחמן, tells us that when the פסוק says "טוב מאד", it is referring to the יצר טוב. But when the פסוק says "והנה טוב מאד", it is referring to the יצר הרע.

The מדרש immediately asks a very strong קשיא. How on earth can we call the יצר הרע very good? Isn't the יצר הרע the one who tries to make us do עבירות, who pulls us away from תורה and מצוות, and who gets us into all sorts of trouble? How can such a thing possibly be described as very good?

The מדרש answers that without the יצר הרע, a person would never build a house, he would never get married, he would never have children, and he would never go into business. The מדרש brings a פסוק from קהלת, "כי היא קנאת איש מרעהו", explaining that so much of what drives a person to work hard and achieve comes from קנאה, the desire to have what someone else has and to accomplish what others have accomplished.

In other words, the very same יצר הרע that can bring a person down is also the force that pushes him to get up in the morning, work hard, build a home, start a family, and accomplish things in life. Without that drive, a person could be perfectly happy sitting around doing absolutely nothing!

At first, it may seem interesting that the מדרש uses almost exactly the same words to describe both the יצר טוב and the יצר הרע. But when you play a little game of spot the difference, you will notice something fascinating. When describing the יצר הרע, the מדרש adds one small letter, a ו, at the beginning.

By the יצר הרע it says "והנה טוב מאד", whereas by the יצר טוב it says "הנה טוב מאד".

What is the significance of that extra ו? And, of course, we still have our most basic question: how can the יצר הרע, which seems to be responsible for so much wrongdoing, possibly be described as very good?

To understand this, we need to look at a fascinating explanation of a גמרא in מסכת שבת.

The גמרא in מסכת שבת tells us that כלל ישראל are compared to a dove. Just as the wings of a dove protect it, so too the מצוות protect כלל ישראל.

The גמרא says:

מה יונה כנפיה מגינות עליה, אף ישראל מצות מגינות עליהן.

Just as a dove is protected by its wings, so too are protected by their מצוות.

brings a remarkable מדרש which explains something very unusual about the way a dove flies.

כל העופות פשקו יגעין וינחין על גבי סלע, והיונה בשעה שהיא יגעה פורחת באחת וינחות באחת.

All other birds, when they become tired from flying, need to stop and rest on a rock. But the dove is different. When it becomes tired, it continues flying with one wing while allowing the other wing to rest. In this way, it can keep flying without having to stop.

The דברי שאול explains a beautiful יסוד from these words of תוספות, which helps us understand the purpose of the יצר הרע and the יצר טוב. Also explain what the gemara means that we are like a dove, do all birds not have two wings?

Hashem created us with both a יצר טוב and a יצר הרע. We often think that every מדה is simply something bad which needs to be removed. But that is not necessarily the case. Many of the כוחות which we describe as bad מדות are actually powerful strengths that Hashem has given us. The problem is not necessarily the מדה itself, but what happens when it is not channelled in the correct way.

If these כוחות are not controlled by good מדות, they can produce terrible results. On the other hand, if a person had no drive, no ambition, and no desire to achieve more, what would motivate him to build anything in the first place?

Without the energy of the יצר הרע, nothing would get built. But without the guidance of the יצר טוב, things would be built endlessly, without knowing when to stop or whether they should be built at all.

The יצר הרע tells us, "Build, build, build! Keep going! Achieve more!" while the יצר טוב tells us, "Stop, stop, stop! Think about what you are doing!" And our job is to be the person in the middle, learning how to contain these כוחות, control them, and use them in the correct way.

Think about a car. The accelerator pedal is an extremely dangerous invention. All you need to do is press it down, and the car can travel at such a frightening speed that it could injure people, destroy property, and cause terrible damage.

Then you have the brake pedal. The brake is there to stop the car whenever necessary, making sure that the driver does not lose control.

But imagine a car that was built with only a brake pedal. It would certainly be a very safe car, but it would not get you anywhere! You could sit inside it all day, press the brake as hard as you like, and you would still be sitting in exactly the same place.

You need the accelerator just as much as you need the brake. The trick is knowing when to press each one.

The **יצר הרע** is like our accelerator. It gives us the energy, the ambition, and the drive to move forward. The **יצר טוב** is like our brake, teaching us when to slow down, when to stop, and how to make sure that all this energy is being used in the right direction.

The **divrie shaul** explains that this is the deeper meaning of the dove. Just as it has one wing which continues flying while the other rests, we too have been given two different **כוחות**. One pushes us to fly higher, and the other teaches us when to hold back.

This understanding clears up one of the biggest misconceptions people have about the **יצר הרע**.

I remember about five years ago; I was invited to lead a Shabbos for high-school boys in Wales. I wanted those boys to leave that Shabbos with one message that I hoped they would never forget:

"Thank You, Hashem, for my **יצר הרע**!"

Now, I realised that this was quite an unusual message to give a group of teenage boys, so before the Shabbos I decided to check with my **דעת תורה** whether it was the correct way to put it.

My **רב** told me that if only the boys could truly understand that message, it would be wonderful. His concern was that they might come away thanking Hashem for their **יצר הרע** while completely forgetting to thank Him for their **יצר טוב**!

It would be rather like a teenager getting into a powerful car for the first time and immediately asking the owner, "How do I make this thing go faster?" without being particularly interested in finding out how to stop it.

But if we can learn to appreciate both the **יצר טוב** and the **יצר הרע**, we begin to see ourselves in a completely different light. We realise that the **יצר הרע** is not simply working against us. The powerful energy behind it can actually be used to fuel us, to give us the strength to build and achieve.

The problem is that we often misunderstand the **יצר הרע**. We see the challenges it puts in front of us and assume that it is simply trying to trip us up.

Imagine a horse being trained to jump. The trainer places a bar in front of the horse and makes it run towards it. The horse learns how to jump over the bar. Just when it has finally mastered that height, the trainer comes along and raises the bar even higher!

Now imagine for a moment that this horse could think like a human being.

It would probably turn around to its trainer and say, "Excuse me! What exactly have you got against me? I am trying to run, and you keep putting things in my way! First, you put a bar in front of me, and I nearly tripped over it. Then, after working so hard, I finally managed to jump over it. And what do you do? You go and raise the bar so that I can trip over it all over again! What is wrong with you?"

Lucky the horse can't think or talk!

Because if it understood what the trainer was doing, it would realise that the bar was never placed there to trip it up. The whole purpose of the bar was to teach it how to jump higher. And the higher the horse learns to jump, the more valuable it becomes as a competition horse.

The same is true with our נסיונות. When we see a נסיון in front of us, we often think that it has been placed there to make us fall. But in reality, it is there to give us an opportunity to discover just how high we can jump.

Without that bar in front of us, we might never even know that we possess such strength. We would never realise how much we are capable of achieving in our עבודת ה'.

The bar is not there to stop us. It is there to tell us, "Jump higher!"

We simply misunderstand the language. When the יצר הרע places a challenge in front of us, we hear a voice saying, "Come on, stop running. You are going to trip anyway. You might as well give up."

But perhaps we need to learn to trust our Trainer a little more. Hashem is the One who created the יצר הרע, and He is the One who allows that bar to be placed in front of us. If He put it there, then there must be a reason. It is not there merely to make us fall, but to give us the opportunity to rise higher than we ever thought possible.

Something happened in my house this week which brought this idea home to me in a rather amusing way.

My little boy came over to me with the sincerest expression on his face. He explained that now that he was in a bigger class, he had a very important request to make.

"Can I start going to bed earlier?"

Now, being the adult in this conversation, I understood perfectly well what he meant. He did not want to go to bed earlier. He wanted to go to bed later!

But just imagine that I had taken his words at face value and answered, "Of course! What a wonderful idea! From tonight, you can go to bed half an hour earlier!" I don't think he would have been particularly impressed.

Although he had asked to go to bed earlier, what he really wanted was the exact opposite. And if I wanted him to continue going to bed at the correct time, I would have to say no to his request, even though on paper it would look as if I were refusing to let him go to bed earlier!

Sometimes, in order to achieve the correct result, we need to understand what is really being asked of us rather than simply listening to the words.

And in a way, we are just like little children when it comes to understanding the יצר הרע. We hear the יצר הרע telling us to enjoy ourselves, to give in, or to trip over the bar. And we think that saying yes to him means following his instructions.

But the real purpose of that נסיון is for us to learn how to say no to the temptation, or, more correctly, how to say yes to Hashem.

The יצר הרע may appear to be telling us to fall, but our task is to use that very challenge as an opportunity to grow. By refusing to fall, we are actually using the נסיון for the purpose for which Hashem allowed it to come our way.

The bar was never there simply to trip us up. It was there to raise our bar.

We can now return to the words of the מדרש with which we began.

The פסוק says:

וַיִּרְא אֱלֹקִים אֶת כָּל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וְהִנֵּה טוֹב מְאֹד.

Hashem looked at everything He had created and saw that it was all very good.

Perhaps we can now understand why the מדרש makes a distinction between "הִנֵּה" and "טוֹב מְאֹד", which refers to the יצר הרע, and "וְהִנֵּה טוֹב מְאֹד", which refers to the יצר הטוב.

The יצר הטוב on its own is certainly something wonderful. It is already טוֹב מְאֹד. It guides us towards doing what is correct and helps us live the way Hashem wants us to live.

But we know that the letter 'ו' has a special meaning. As חז"ל explain, ניו מוסיף, על ענין ראשון. The letter ו comes to add something onto what was there before.

And perhaps that is exactly what the מדרש is teaching us. The יצר טוב is already wonderful, but how do we add to it? How do we build on what we already have and achieve more and more?

Through the powerful drive of the יצר הרע, when we learn how to channel it correctly. The יצר טוב tells us what is good, while the energy of the יצר הרע can help push us to achieve even more good. One gives us direction, and the other provides the drive to move forward.

It is that extra ו, that extra addition, which can take something already wonderful and help us build it into something even greater.

I saw a beautiful example of this just last week on חול המועד. A boy who has recently started his own journey of growth through struggle said something to me which expressed this idea so clearly.

His accelerator is pressed down almost all the way. He has an enormous amount of energy and drive, and he is still learning how to work his brakes. But he told me that he actually enjoys learning much more now.

And when you think about it, it makes perfect sense. His engine is running at full force. He has so much energy inside him, and that energy gives him the ability to live more, to do more, and to build more.

Of course, that same power could be used for good or for bad. An engine running at full force can take a person a tremendous distance, but it can also cause terrible damage if the driver does not know how to control it.

His עבודה is not to switch off the engine. It is to learn how to control it. He needs to work out when to accelerate and when to brake, so that all that wonderful energy becomes a force that builds rather than destroys.

And once he learns how to do that, the very power which once caused him so much difficulty can become one of his greatest strengths.

And perhaps this brings us back to the dove.

The גמרא tells us that the wings of the dove protect it, just as our מצוות protect us. תוספות brings the מדרש that when the dove becomes tired, it can continue flying with one wing while the other rests.

Perhaps we can understand this to mean that even when the dove is being chased by predators, it does not necessarily need to land and leave itself exposed. It has

the ability to keep moving forward, because even while one wing rests, the other continues to fly.

And the same is true for us. Hashem has placed us in a world with so many opportunities to fall, but also with so many opportunities to grow. We have been given enormous כוחות, and it is up to us to learn how to use them.

How fortunate we are that when we face a נסיון, we are not simply lost or forced to give up. We have the יצר טוב to guide us and the powerful energy of the יצר הרע which, when channelled correctly, can help us push forward.

And perhaps, with every נסיון that we overcome, with every time we learn to press the brake at the right moment and use the accelerator in the right direction, we become that much stronger and that much more valuable.

Until eventually, we become Hashem's most valuable racehorse ever!