



# THE NEGATIVE INCLINATION

*“And behold it was very good.” This is the yetzer hara (the bad inclination)...[For] without the yetzer hara, a person would not build a home or marry a woman; he would neither have children nor engage in business.*

*Midrash Rabbah Genesis (9:7)*

The deepest part of us—our souls—genuinely wants to do the right thing. However, there is another side to us, the *yetzer hara* (the negative inclination).<sup>1</sup> The *yetzer hara* may take many forms. The main tool of the *yetzer hara* is not frontal seductions and overwhelming desires; it is thoughtlessness. And thoughtlessness is achieved by busyness—by making sure that our every waking moment is filled with work, texts, driving, checking our various social media accounts. Through this, it ensures that we never find the time to take a step back, establish our goals, and assess whether we are on track.<sup>2</sup>

The *yetzer hara* also chips away at our commitment to create ambiguity. It then exploits that ambiguity. For example, we may know that it is wrong to speak negatively about someone else (*lashon hara*). However,

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1 See, for example, Talmud, Tractate *Bava Batra* 16a as per the verse in Genesis 8:21: “For the inclination of the heart of man is evil from his youth.”

2 *Ramchal, Mesilat Yesharim*, chap. 2.

the *yetzer hara* alerts us to just how delicious it is to share salacious news with a friend. It then chips away at our commitment by ensuring that we remain a non-contemplative person. We act negatively once, and the second time gets easier. We begin to find ways of justifying the behavior to ourselves as not being prohibited at all.<sup>3</sup> The *Ramchal* tells us that the non-contemplative person is like a blind person walking on the narrow path at the top of a windy river-bed. One wrong move, one stumble, and the consequences can be disastrous.<sup>4</sup>

The *yetzer hara* will exploit any opening we give it. It exploits our hurt pride to get us to react with anger or withdrawal. It turns our fears or insecurities into resentment. It tells us that we are too tired, too hungry, too angry, or too overwhelmed to do something good. It activates our cynicism to insulate ourselves from corrective messages.<sup>5</sup> “There are not enough sacks in the world to contain the wily arguments of the bad inclination,” said the Kotzker Rebbe.<sup>6</sup>

This is the superficial us, and we have to get past this if we are to live a life of real meaning.

The *yetzer hara* ensures that we have a balance of choice. Things got more complicated after the sin of Adam and Eve when good and bad were mixed up, making moral clarity an even greater challenge.<sup>7</sup> Instead of being a voice outside of ourselves, we now began to identify with the *yetzer hara*. It is no longer an external voice whispering in my ear telling me to spend the day in bed and do nothing on a cold day. Rather, I say, “I don’t want to get out of bed.” And it is seemingly no longer my real self telling me that I should nevertheless get up, but rather a moral imperative outside of myself: “But you should get up anyway.”

But, the *yetzer hara* doesn’t only seduce us to do the wrong thing. It also tells us what is bad about the good. It confuses us.<sup>8</sup> “I get prayer,

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3 Talmud, Tractate *Kiddushin*, p. 40a.

4 *Ramchal*, *ibid*.

5 *Ramchal*, *Mesilat Yesharim*, chap. 5.

6 As brought by Menachem Posner, Chabad.org, based on *Kochav Hashachar*, by Simcha Raz.

7 *Ramchal*, *Maamar Hageulah*, chap. 2.

8 *Ramchal*, *Mesilat Yesharim*, introduction.

but why should the services be so long?" "I get the commandments, but I don't want to be told what to do."

This is one understanding of what the Sages meant when they said: "Average (neither righteous nor bad) people are governed by both their good and bad inclinations."<sup>9</sup> True, our *yetzer hara* can incite us to do bad. But much more insidious for the average, good person is the ambiguity and doubts that eat away at our commitment, sap our energies, and undermine our motivation to do good. It allows us to settle for inconsistency or mediocrity and—eventually—to suffer from moral fatigue.

More than the *yetzer hara* wants to make a person sin, it wants him to fall into sadness because of the sin. The sadness comes through the feeling of inferiority one feels after doing the sin.<sup>10</sup> It deprives us of the moral courage to get up, dust ourselves off, repent, and engage once again in our essential goodness.

#### THE BAD INCLINATION MADE THE CREATION "VERY GOOD"

When the Torah details the creation of the world, it states numerous times that "God looked and He saw that it was good (*tov*)." However, the creation of man didn't elicit this response. God endowed man with the awesome power to make choices, which includes bad choices. Hence, man was not yet in his final state of good.

However, the Torah then states: "God saw everything that he had created and it was 'very good' (*tov me'od*)."<sup>11</sup> The Sages say that the final ingredient that turned the world into "very good" was the bad inclination—man's *yetzer hara*.<sup>12</sup>

How can this be? How could the force pushing man toward bad be branded as very good?

The Sages explain that if not for the *yetzer hara*, no one would build a house, marry, have children, or engage in commerce.<sup>13</sup> Though our

9 Talmud, Tractate *Berachot* 61b.

10 "Know Yourself," by the author of *Bilvavi*, p. 45.

11 Genesis 1:31; see the *Ramban* ad loc.

12 *Midrash Rabbah*, Genesis 9:7.

13 *Ibid*.

impulses for ownership, sex, and wealth can lead us down the path of bad, these very same desires can be channeled for good.<sup>14</sup> In fact, if these desires did not exist, we would not engage in worldly endeavors, be they positive or negative. Instead, desiring to do good, we would withdraw from the world to the nearest ashram or cave. For that, God doesn't need humans. Angels would be better!

And so, the *yetzer hara*—that bundle of passions that takes us to all the wrong places—can also be turned around to face the other direction. The *Shema*, which is recited daily, states, “You should serve God with all of your hearts,”<sup>15</sup> implying that we all have at least two hearts. These, say the Sages, are our *yetzer hatov* (good inclination) and our *yetzer hara* (bad inclination).<sup>16</sup> The *Shema* tells us to serve God with both hearts. We have to channel the desires of our *yetzer hara* so that it too produces good.

Take food as an example. Food is one of our basic sensual desires, and there seems nothing more grossly physical than someone who chronically gorges himself on food. But, just because of that, God directed us to elevate it to holiness. We make special foods for the Shabbat and *chagim* (festivals). On Pesach (Passover), many of the mitzvot that we do are food based, e.g., eating matzah and maror (bitter herbs), and drinking the four cups of wine. We also make a blessing over wine on many special occasions, e.g., at a wedding, a *brit milah* (a circumcision<sup>17</sup>), for Kiddush on Shabbat and the *chagim*, and several other occasions.

What this means is that we are taking our physical drive to eat for sustenance plus our desire to want culinary experiences and harnessing that to drive holiness. When we do that, the food itself becomes holy, and so do we.

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14 Yefeh Toar, *ibid.*

15 Deuteronomy 6:5.

16 Rashi, *ibid.*

17 Lit., “a covenant of circumcision.”

## IMAGINATION

The great motivator of sin is our power of imagination.<sup>18</sup> Imagination is that which allows us to make a leap beyond ourselves and be God-like. In fact, the Hebrew word for “imagination,” *dimyon*, is related to the word *adameh*, “I will be like.”

Still, imagination is a double-edged sword. We can use our imagination to have all kinds of fantasies, such as lusting after power or sensual encounters. The snake activated Eve’s imagination when he told her how she and Adam could literally be gods (and not just God-like) if they ate from the forbidden fruit.<sup>19</sup>

It is imagination that fools us into absorbing the advertising messages so cleverly targeting us. It is that which leads us to naturally judge our actions favorably (or at least to identify every extenuating circumstance) while finding it so difficult to give our fellow man a similar benefit of the doubt.<sup>20</sup> If we see our friend smoke ten cigarettes, we’ll label him a chain smoker in danger of dying of cancer, but the chain smoker himself convinces himself that smoking isn’t so dangerous. His cognitive dissonance forces him to reinterpret the information in his favor.

Our imagination is used by our *yetzer hara* to dream of being rich and famous as secrets to happiness. It is that which provokes a man into imagining that the scantily dressed girl who just crossed the street is trying to attract just him. The *yetzer hara* activates our imagination to picture an alternative life full of sensuous or other gratifications.

It was this that was the legacy of the sin of Adam and Eve. From then on, all fruits—i.e., all physical phenomena—were tainted with the sensation of physical pleasure disconnected from their spiritual purpose. “I have eaten (from the forbidden fruits) and I will eat again,” says Adam<sup>21</sup>—not out of defiance, but in recognition of the new reality. As

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18 Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, *Alei Shur*, vol. 2, p. 43.

19 Maimonides, *Guide to the Perplexed* 2:30.

20 This is known as the actor-observer bias.

21 *Midrash Rabbah*, Genesis 19:22.

if to say, “Now that I have tasted the fruit, I shall never again be able to eat without this sensation recurring.”<sup>22</sup>

#### AN OLD FRIEND

When Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner was a student in Hebron Yeshiva, his mentor saw him talking as if to someone else.

“Who are you talking to?” his mentor inquired.

“I am talking to my old friend,” the young Yitzchak Hutner answered.

“And who might that be?”

“My *yetzer hara*,” came Yitzchak Hutner’s reply.

“And why is your good inclination not your friend?” inquired the mentor.

“My good inclination is a fair-weather friend,” came the insightful reply. “But my evil inclination is always with me. He never leaves me. He is forever loyal.”

The *yetzer hara* is called three things: a king, an old man, and a fool (*melech, zaken, u’chesil*):<sup>23</sup>

- A “king” because everyone listens to him.
- “Old” because he is with the person from birth to old age.<sup>24</sup>
- A “fool” because we can outwit his seductive voice with counter messaging through our authentic voice of goodness.

In fact, just because he is an old friend, he is a fool. We can easily get to know exactly how he operates, turning his very instruments against him. We can use that same power of imagination to do good instead of bad.<sup>25</sup> We can imagine holiness and realize that it is far sweeter, more profound, and more enduring than the futilities of our *yetzer hara*.<sup>26</sup> The *yetzer hara* has been around since the beginning of time, but he experiences no learning curve. He is the ultimate fool.<sup>27</sup>

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22 Rabbi Mordechai Miller, *Shabbat Shiurim*, vol. 1, Genesis.

23 *Kohelet Rabbah* 4:13.

24 Whereas the opposite inclination, our *yetzer tov* (our good inclination), is only fully active from bat/bar mitzvah.

25 Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, *Alei Shur*, vol. 2, p. 43.

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 44–45.

27 *Kohelet Rabbah* 4:13.