



## Disturbing Remarks from the Avodas Yisrael and the Zera Kodesh

# The Yetzer Hara Occasionally Bribes a Jew with a Minor Mitzvah to Prevent Him from Performing Teshuvah and Serving Hashem Enthusiastically

On the auspiciously approaching Shabbas kodesh, we will read parshas Shoftim. It will be the first Shabbas in the month of Elul, the month designated for teshuvah. It is fitting to begin this essay with the sacred remarks of the holy Maggid of Kozhnitz, zy" a, in Avodas Yisrael. He explains the wonderful connection between parshas Shoftim and the month of Elul. Here are the opening pesukim of the parsha (Devarim 16, 18):

“שופטים ושוטרים תתן לך בכל שעריך אשר ה' אלקיך נותן לך לשבטיך  
ושפטו את העם משפט צדק. לא תטה משפט לא תכיר פנים ולא תקח שוחד,  
כי השוחד יעור עיני חכמים ויסלף דברי צדיקים.”

Judges and officers (enforcers) shall you place at all of your entryways which Hashem, your G-d, gives you for your tribes; and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment. You shall not pervert judgment, you shall not display favoritism; and you shall not take a bribe, because bribery will blind the eyes of the wise and distort the words of the righteous. The Avodas Yisrael teaches us that these pesukim contain a crucial lesson related to the teshuvah we are obligated to perform during the month of Elul. Here is a concise translation of his remarks:

**This parsha is always read during the month of Elul, which is the designated time for every Jew to return to his Creator. His sins of the past year will be forgiven on account of remorse, contemplations of teshuvah, tears,**

**and lamenting his past transgressions. He should be so embittered until it is evident to the One Who knows our deepest thoughts that he will not commit that sin ever again. This is the implication of the Torah's admonition: “Judges and officers . . .” Every Jew must position personal judges to monitor himself—namely, his eyes, ears, nostrils, and mouth. These seven orifices in the skull are referred to as the gates to his soul. This is the meaning of “at all your entryways.” They should monitor all of his actions.**

### The Yetzer HaRa Occasionally Helps a Jew Perform a Mitzvah

Continuing with this concept, the Avodas Yisrael adds an insight that should concern us all. He explains how the words “**you shall not take a bribe**” relate to the month of Elul. He writes that a strategy of the yetzer hara is to cause a person to sin, fall into its trap, and then to be consoled by performing a mitzvah or learning Torah—thinking to himself that this makes up for the transgression. Ultimately, he will desire to commit the wrongdoing again (because he did not really do teshuvah). Hence, the Torah warns against this pitfall; it is tantamount to **a bribe blinding the wise** from the truth. For, in reality, the reward for a mitzvah and the punishment for an aveirah are separate. An aveirah can only be atoned for by means of true, sincere teshuvah; it will prevent a person from repeating the prior offense.

The great Rabbi of Ropshitz, zy”a, teaches us this same concept in Zera Kodesh (Shoftim). He explains that occasionally the neshamah plans to do a good deed and cannot be thwarted completely. This causes the yetzer hara to panic being fearful that this Jew will start learning Torah regularly or performing important mitzvos that foil the yetzer hara. This prompts the yetzer hara to make a minor mitzvah available to this Jew to curb his enthusiasm and prevent him from doing something better and more significant. For, he will think that he can suffice and make do with this minor mitzvah.

In this vein, he interprets the phrase **“bribery will blind the eyes of the wise”**: For, when you approach a particular chacham, and he ignores the wrongdoing you did, and treats you with respect in the merit of the mitzvah you performed, and neglects to reveal or acknowledge your transgression, the honor and respect he pays you will harm you. **“And distort the words of the righteous”**—even if they inform you that it is necessary to do teshuvah, the yetzer hara will convince you otherwise, since you are performing such a significant mitzvah.

Thus, we learn from their sacred remarks an important principle regarding the service of Hashem. It is not sufficient to merely check if you have performed mitzvos, because sometimes those mitzvos are part of the duplicitous tactics of the yetzer hara. It makes those mitzvos available to you to quiet the fervent desire of your neshamah to serve Hashem with all your vigor in the study of Torah and the fulfillment of mitzvos. Hence, it is the strategy of the yetzer hara to distract you by assisting you to perform several minor mitzvos. This will make you feel good about yourself and what you have accomplished and dissuade you from serving Hashem to the full extent you are capable of—such as studying Torah regularly and praying diligently to Hashem with pure intent and focus, and ridding yourself of material concerns.

### The Torah is an Antidote to the Yetzer HaRa

We will now examine another related teaching from the holy Maggid of Kozhnitz, zy”a, in the sefer Yakar MiPaz

(Haftarah Vayeishev). Citing his mentor, Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk, zy”a, he addresses the statement in the Gemara (Kiddushin 30b): **“כך הקב”ה אמר להם לישראל, בני בראתי יצר הרע. ובראתי לו תורה תבלין.”** Thus has HKB”H said to Yisrael, **“My son, I have created the yetzer hara, and I have created Torah as its antidote (spice).”** Here is a translation of what he says:

**I heard from the holy Rabbi Elimelech concerning Chazal’s statement: “I have created the yetzer hara, and I have created Torah as its spice”—that, undoubtedly, a person cannot commit aveiros his entire life, because he will become sick of it. For him, the Torah resembles a spice that sweetens the sins for him. Due to the Torah that he learns, he thinks afterwards that he has actually performed teshuvah. Subsequently, it causes him to sin anew.**

This deserves further clarification seeing as the Gemara (ibid.) goes on to say: **“ואם אתם עוסקים בתורה אין אתם נמסרים בידו... ואם אין אתם עוסקים בתורה אתם נמסרים בידו.”** If you are engaged in Torah-study you will not be delivered into its hand . . . but if you do not engage in Torah study, you will be delivered into its hand. Here the Gemara states explicitly that if one studies Torah, he will not be delivered into the hand of the yetzer hara. So, how can he interpret this to mean that the Torah acts as a spice used by the yetzer hara to sweeten the sins in the eyes of a Jew so that he will continue doing them?

It appears that we can make sense of the teaching of the righteous Rabbi Elimelech, zy”a, based on what the Taz (O.C. 47, 1) writes concerning the berachah recited for learning Torah. The sages instituted the formula **“לעסוק”** rather than **“ללמוד דברי תורה”**. They wished to impress upon us that the essence of the mitzvah of studying Torah requires labor and exertion like someone engaged in a negotiation and business transaction. This requirement is evident from Chazal’s teaching (Berachos 63b): **“שאינ דברי תורה מתקיימין אלא במי שממית עצמו עליה, שנאמר זאת התורה אדם כי ימות באהל.”** Words of Torah are not retained except by

**one who sacrifices himself for its sake? For it is stated** (Bamidbar 19, 14): **“This is the Torah of a man who dies in a tent.”**

We can now suggest that this is what the Gemara is saying with regards to the study of Torah. If a person only studies Torah casually without labor and exertion, the concern exists that his study is attributable to the yetzer hara—who employed it as a spice to sweeten this person’s sins in his eyes causing him to think erroneously that this study has made amends for his sins. This mistaken belief will enable the yetzer, chas v’shalom, to cause him to sin again. On the other hand, if a person studies Torah with labor, exertion, and diligence—**“עוסק בתורה”**—it is a telltale sign that his study was an act of kedushah. Someone who studies Torah in this manner will not be delivered into the hand of the yetzer.

With this understanding, let us review the teaching in the Gemara: **“כך הקב”ה אמר להם לישראל, בני בראתי יצר הרע ובראתי: “כך הקב”ה אמר להם לישראל, בני בראתי יצר הרע ובראתי: HKB”H informed us that together with the creation of the yetzer hara, He created the Torah as a spice to sweeten a person’s sins, i.e., mitigate their severity and consequences. So, how, indeed, is it possible to subdue the yetzer by means of Torah-study? To which HKB”H explains: “וואם אתם עוסקים בתורה”—if you study Torah with labor, exertion, and commitment—not casually—it is a telltale sign that your study stems from kedushah and not from the yetzer. For, if it was prompted by the yetzer, it would suffice to learn only a little bit in a nonchalant manner. So, if you study Torah with labor and exertion, **“you will not be delivered into the hand of the yetzer.”** But if you are not an **“עוסק בתורה”** then you will not be rescued from the yetzer, because it has used your casual Torah-study to dupe you into believing that you are not a sinner.**

### **“Redeem Your sheep from the shearers”**

This explanation concurs magnificently with the interpretation of the Yearos Dvash (Part 1, first drush for the month of Elul) of a verse found in a piyut for Motza’ei

Shabbas (Ayom V’Norah): **“פדה עמך מעזים צאנך מיד גוזזים”**—**redeem Your people from the strong, Your sheep from the hand of the shearers.** He says that we occasionally see a rasha repent and perform teshuvah; he fasts, cries, and performs other acts of penitence. Yet, a short time later, he resumes his negative behavior and acts corruptly. He compares this to sheep; people shear their wool to benefit from it; they give the sheep salt and the like that promote the growth of the wool. Then, when the wool is fully grown, they shear it off and repeat the cycle. In a similar fashion, the forces of evil feed off the plentiful kedushah within the sinners of Yisrael; it sustains them.

But when they have drained a Jew of every last drop of kedushah, Hashem has left him, and he is evil and sinful, the forces of evil encourage him to repent and return to Hashem. Once the Jew is saturated with the goodness of Hashem and full of Hashem’s berachah—due to his service of Hashem and performance of mitzvos—the forces of evil prevent him from abiding by Hashem’s mitzvos, just as they did previously. This enables them to nurture themselves from the replenished plenty of kedushah.

This is what we ask Hashem to save us from—to **redeem Your sheep from the hand of the shearers**—so that this process does not happen to us, and we do not nurture the forces of evil. Therefore, we need many preventive measures and safeguards to avoid resuming our prior foolishness and misbehavior, chas v’shalom. On the contrary, may we become stronger every day in Torah, knowledge, and reverence.

### **Two Ways to Discern if a Mitzvah Stems from Kedushah**

Thus, it is imperative to recognize the origin of a simple mitzvah. Did it come from the yetzer tov or perhaps, chas v’shalom, from the yetzer hara, who wants to prevent a Jew from serving Hashem on a higher level? A simple answer is for a Jew to consider whether the fulfillment of this mitzvah prevented him from serving Hashem with the



increased intensity and vigor he originally planned on. This, however, is not always so easy to discern, since the yetzer hara tries to convince him that he is too weak and incapable of serving Hashem with increased vigor.

So, let us suggest two answers. Firstly, a person should ask himself whether or not the yetzer hara tried to prevent or oppose the performance of this mitzvah as it would for an important mitzvah such as the study of Torah. If so, this would indicate that the mitzvah stemmed from a place of kedushah. If, however, he does not sense any opposition from the yetzer hara relating to this mitzvah, he should suspect that perhaps the yetzer is **offering him a minor mitzvah to cool off his enthusiasm, so that he will not end up doing something bigger and better**—as suggested by the great Rabbi of Ropshitz, zy”a.

We can suggest that this method is alluded to in the opening words of our parsha: “שופטים ושוטרים תתן לך”. After all, the chochmah, understanding, and intellect in a person’s brain are the “**shoftim**” with which he **judges** whether or not any act is one of kedushah or not. He is able to make this assessment if “**shotrim**”—**enforcing officers within him**—are required to compel the yetzer hara within him to allow him to perform this mitzvah. If he faces resistance from the yetzer hara, it is a sign that this mitzvah comes from a source of kedushah.

Secondly, Chazal teach us (Avos 4, 2): “שמצוה גוררת מצוה ועבירה גוררת עבירה”—**one mitzvah leads to another mitzvah, and one aveirah leads to another aveirah**. So, if this mitzvah is merely a device employed by the yetzer hara to reduce your enthusiasm to serve Hashem to an even greater degree, then it will not motivate you and lead to the performance of another mitzvah. After all, the aim of the yetzer here is to dissuade a Jew from performing more mitzvos and even bigger mitzvos.

### Run to Do All Mitzvos—Major or Minor

In this manner, let us interpret the following Mishnah (ibid.): “בן עזאי אומר, הוי רץ למצוה קלה כבחמורה ובורח מן העבירה,”

שמצוה גוררת מצוה ועבירה גוררת עבירה, ששכר מצוה מצוה ושכר עבירה. **Ben Azai says: One should run to perform a minor mitzvah just as he would to a major mitzvah, and he should flee from performing an aveirah; for one mitzvah leads to another mitzvah, and one aveirah leads to another aveirah. For, the reward for a mitzvah is a mitzvah, and the reward for an aveirah is an aveirah.** Based on what we have learned, a person might be leery and hesitant to perform a minor mitzvah out of concern that it might have been presented to him by the yetzer hara. To dismiss this concern, Ben Azzai urges us: **Run to perform a minor mitzvah just as you would to a major mitzvah.**

And if you are still worried that this mitzvah did not originate from a source of kedushah but was made available to you by the yetzer hara, remember that **one mitzvah leads to another mitzvah, and one aveirah leads to another aveirah**; apply this criterion to discern the origins of the mitzvah. In other words, if it is apparent to you that this mitzvah inspires you to perform other mitzvos, this proves that it originated in kedushah. If, however, you see that this mitzvah cooled down your enthusiasm to perform other mitzvos, it is apparent that it came from the yetzer hara.

I believe that both of these methods are hinted to in tefilas Arvis (Hashkiveinu): “והסר שטן מלפנינו ומאחרינו”—**and remove the adversary from before us and behind us**. We can interpret this as a request to HKB”H to help us discern the origin of the mitzvah before we actually perform it. Enable us to recognize if the yetzer hara is urging us to perform this mitzvah to accomplish its goal by sensing if it opposes this mitzvah or not. But even if we fail to make this distinction prior to performing the mitzvah, we also request that Hashem will help us by **removing the adversary behind us**—i.e., after doing the mitzvah—by scrutinizing the consequences of the mitzvah. Did it enhance our desire to do mitzvos or diminish our desire?

## A Wonderful Test Suggested by the Divrei Yechezkel

I learned this second method of discerning the true nature of a mitzvah from the teachings of the distinguished Rabbi of Shinaveh, zy"a, in Divrei Yechezkel (Shemos). He comments on the Midrash (S.R. 1, 32) related to the passuk (Shemos 2, 19): **"They replied, 'An Egyptian man saved us from the shepherds.'" Yisro's daughters said to Moshe: "יִשְׂרָאֵל כֹּחֵךְ" (well done or thanks) for saving us from the shepherds."** Moshe said to them: **"That Egyptian whom I killed, he saved you."** Hence, they said to their father, **"An Egyptian man saved us."** In other words, who caused this one to come to us? **The Egyptian man whom he killed.** What message did Moshe Rabeinu intend to convey by telling them that it was the Egyptian whom he killed that saved them?

He explains that a person occasionally does something that at the time seems to be a mitzvah. Subsequently, however, he has doubts and starts to question whether in reality it was a mitzvah or alternatively an aveirah. To resolve this dilemma, he need only look at the consequences of his actions. If it led to a positive result, it indicates that the original deed was a mitzvah, in keeping with the teaching: **"מצוה גוררת מצוה"**. If, however, it led to a negative, undesirable result, it indicates that the original deed was an aveirah and not a mitzvah, in keeping with the teaching: **"עבירה גוררת עבירה"**.

This was the dilemma experienced by Moshe Rabeinu. Although he killed the Egyptian l'shem shamayim, nevertheless his conscience bothered him—perhaps it was wrong to take a human life. But when he saw that as a result of killing the Egyptian, he ended up saving the daughters of Yisro, he realized that he did a righteous, justified deed. Furthermore, he was privileged to save many more lives, proving the veracity of the truism: **"מצוה גוררת מצוה"**.

Additionally, what the distinguished Rabbi of Shinaveh, zy"a, explains based on this notion in relation to the passuk

(Bereishis 50, 12) is brought down in Divrei Yechezkel HaChadash (Addendum to Vayechi): **וַיַּעֲשׂוּ בָנָיו לּוֹ כֵּן כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּהוּ—his sons did for him exactly as he had instructed them.** He interprets this passuk as a question and an answer. **"His sons did for Him"** inquires how can we know if the actions of His sons, referring to the children of HKB"H, were done l'shem shamayim. The answer is: **"Exactly as He instructed them"**—if the deed resulted in a mitzvah that Hashem had commanded them, it is clear that the deed was also a mitzvah.

The distinguished Rabbi of Shinaveh, zy"a, once presented this notion at his holy Friday night Shabbas table when the people in attendance pushed so enthusiastically that they accidentally extinguished the candles on the Shabbas table. He commented that this proved that the pushing was not l'shem shamayim. For, if it had been l'shem shamayim, it would not have resulted in an aveirah.

## A Chacham Foresees the Consequences of His Actions

Based on this concept—that a person can determine the genuine nature and origins of his actions based on their consequences—we can shed some light on Chazal's statement (Tamid 32a): **"איזהו חכם הרואה את הנולד"—who is a wise man? He who sees a future development—i.e., he foresees the consequences of his actions.** The true **"chacham"** outwits and is cleverer than the yetzer hara, who is called a fool (Kohes 4, 13): **"מלך זקן וכסיל"—an old and foolish king.** The yetzer hara traps a Jew by disguising an aveirah as a mitzvah; a Jew who outwits the yetzer hara deserves to be called a **"chacham"—a wise man.**

This is the implication of their eloquent statement: **"Who is a chacham?"** Who deserves to be praised for his wisdom used to determine whether the deed he is performing is a mitzvah or an aveirah? **"הרואה את הנולד"**—the person who foresees the consequences resulting from his deed to discern retroactively whether it was a mitzvah or not.

With this understanding, we can interpret the following (Shabbas 31b): "אמר רבא, בשעה שמכניסין אדם לדין אומרים לו, נשאת ונתת באמונה, קבעת עתים לתורה, עסקת בפריה ורביה, צפית לישועה, פלפלת בחכמה, הבנת דבר מתוך דבר." Rava said: **When they escort a person to his heavenly judgment, they ask him, "Did you conduct business transactions in good faith? Did you set aside fixed times for Torah-study? Did you engage in procreation? Did you wait with hope for the salvation (coming of Mashiach)? Did you delve into chochmah? Did you infer one thing from another?"** Although the last two questions—**"פלפלת בחכמה, הבנת דבר מתוך דבר"**—seem to be related to Torah-study, they are not juxtaposed to the question: **"Did you set aside fixed times for Torah-study?"** Why not? In keeping with our current discussion, we can propose that these issues

do not apply exclusively to the study of Torah; they also apply to the struggle to overcome the yetzer hara.

As we have explained, the yetzer hara occasionally assists a Jew to fulfill a mitzvah as part of its strategy to prevent him from serving Hashem properly and with fervor. Therefore, they ask him in the heavenly court: **"Did you delve into chochmah?"**—to ascertain whether a particular mitzvah was from the yetzer hara or not. If you reply that you delved into the matter with chochmah but failed to reveal the duplicity of the yetzer, they ask the additional question: **"Did you infer one thing from another?"** In other words, did you at least examine the results of the mitzvah? Did it lead to a higher level of serving Hashem or the opposite, chas v'shalom?



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