



The Boys Wreaked Havoc inside Her

The Profound Meaning of Rabeinu HaKadosh the Gilgul of Yaakov Avinu: “I was taught this by Antoninus” a Gilgul of the Good Spark of Eisav

In this week's parsha, parshas Toldos, it behooves us to focus on the vigorous struggle between Yaakov Avinu and Eisav HaRasha that began while they were still in their mother's womb. Here is the pertinent text (Bereishis 25, 21): **ויעתר יצחק לה' לנוכח אשתו כי עקרה היא ויעתר לו ה' ותהר רבקה: אשתו, ויתרוצצו הבנים בקרבה ותאמר אם כן למה זה אנכי ותלך לדרוש את ה', ויאמר ה' לה שני גוים בבטןך ושני לאומים ממעיך יפרדו ולאום ייטצח את האום ויאמר ה' לנוכח אשתו כי עקרה היא ויעתר לו ה' ותהר רבקה: אשתו, ויתרוצצו הבנים בקרבה ותאמר אם כן למה זה אנכי ותלך לדרוש את ה', ויאמר ה' לה שני גוים בבטןך ושני לאומים ממעיך יפרדו ולאום ייטצח את האום** Yitzchak entreated Hashem in the presence of his wife, because she was barren. Hashem allowed Himself to be entreated by him, and his wife Rivkah conceived. And the boys clashed inside her, and she said, “If so, why is it that I am?” So, she went to inquire of Hashem. And Hashem informed her: “Two nations are in your womb; and two regimes from your insides will be separated; and one regime will become strong from the other regime; and the elder will serve the younger.”

We must endeavor to understand the inquiry of Rivkah Imeinu: **“אם כן למה זה אנכי”**. Rashi interprets this as follows: **“If the pain of pregnancy is so great, why am I desiring and praying for pregnancy?”** This interpretation is indeed surprising. It seems unimaginable that a barren woman, especially one as righteous as Rivkah Imeinu, would be ready and willing to forego the miracle of childbirth solely on account of the pain and stress of pregnancy.

Rivkah Was Distressed by the Struggle that Raged within Her

The simple explanation is that Rashi was not referring to Rivkah's physical discomfort. Rather, he was referring to her spiritual distress regarding the raging battle transpiring inside her womb. Hence, Rashi cites the Midrash: **When she would pass by doorways of Torah-study of Shem and Eiver, Yaakov would run and struggle to get out; when she would pass by doorways of idol-worship, Eisav would struggle to get out . . .** This prompted her to say, “If so,” that the anguish of pregnancy is so great, “why am I doing this”—desiring and praying to be pregnant?

It is evident from HKB”H's response to Rivkah—**“Two nations are in your womb”**—that she was initially unaware that she was carrying twins and that they were struggling with each other. She thought that she was carrying a single fetus who was torn between the kedushah of Batei Midrash and the tumah of houses of avodah-zarah. Understood in this way, Rivkah's anguish is understandable. She was primarily worried about her fetus who was struggling with issues of kedushah and tumah before it was even born.

Notwithstanding, this still does not truly explain the extent of Rivkah's anguish to the point that she exclaimed:

“Why am I doing this?” or “Why is this happening to me?” After all, one of our fundamental beliefs is that a person has the freedom of choice to follow his yetzer hara or his yetzer hatov. That being the case, it was highly likely that after this child’s birth, and he would be educated in the ways of the Torah by his parents, he would choose the Batei Midrash over the houses of avodah-zarah. So, why was Rivkah protesting at that point in time?

Before addressing Rivkah’s protest, let us examine the profound reply she received from HKB”H: **Hashem informed her: “Two nations are in your womb; and two regimes from your insides will be separated; and one regime will become strong from the other regime; and the elder will serve the younger.”** Here Rashi comments: **“Two nations (‘goyim’) are in your womb”—it (‘goyim’) is spelled “גויים”, referring to “proud ones.” This refers to Antoninus (the Roman Caesar) and Rebbe (Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi), for neither radish nor horseradish ceased to be found on their tables, neither during the sunny season or the rainy season.**

Now, we know that these two famous individuals—a Roman leader and a Jewish leader—lived together in peace and had great respect for one another. But how did this divine revelation console Rivkah and calm her down? Additionally, according to this interpretation, how are we to interpret the rest of HKB”H’s response: **“And two regimes from your insides will be separated; and one regime will become strong from the other regime; and the elder will serve the younger”?**

The Dispute between Rabeinu HaKadosh and Antoninus: When does the yetzer hara begin to exert its influence on a person?

We will begin to shed some light on these questions by referring to an illuminating teaching of Chazal in the Gemara (Sanhedrin 91b):

“אמר לו אנטונינוס לרבי מאימתי יצר הרע שולט באדם, משעת יצירה או משעת יציאה אמר לו משעת יצירה, אמר לו אם כן בועט במעי אמו ויוצא, אלא משעת יציאה. אמר רבי דבר זה לימדני אנטונינוס, ומקרא מסייעו שנאמר לפתח חטאת רובץ.”

Antoninus asked Rebbe: From when does the yetzer hara exert influence over a person? From the moment of formation (as an embryo in the womb) or from the moment of birth? He (Rebbe) answered him: From the moment of formation. He (Antoninus) said to him: If so, it (the fetus) would kick against its mother’s womb and exit (prematurely). Rather, it must be from the time of birth. Rebbe responded: This matter did Antoninus teach me, and a passuk supports him, for it is stated (ibid. 4, 7): “Sin crouches at the door.” In other words, the passuk alludes to the door or entrance into the world, i.e., the moment a child is born; that is when the yetzer hara begins to exert its negative influence. The Maharsha is puzzled by Rabeinu HaKadosh’s agreement with Antoninu’s conclusion because of a teaching in another Gemara (Yoma 82b):

There was an incident involving a pregnant woman who smelled food on Yom Kippur, and the fetus craved it, so much so that refraining from eating it, would have endangered both her health and the health of her fetus. They asked Rebbe what to do? He instructed them to whisper in her ear that it is Yom Kippur; perhaps this would help her control her craving. They whispered in her ear, and it worked; she was able to abstain for the sake of Yom Kippur observance. Since this fetus demonstrated behavior consistent with kedushah, this prompted Rebbe to apply the following passuk (Yirmiyah 1, 5): **בטרם אצרך—before I formed you in the womb, I knew you . . .** Rabbi Yochanan was born from her.

The Gemara goes on to relate another incident with opposite results involving another pregnant woman who smelled food and craved it on Yom Kippur. They consulted with Rabbi Chanina, and he also told them to whisper to her that it is Yom Kippur. In this instance, the whisper did not work; her craving and the fetus’ craving did not subside. Here, Rabbi Chanina applied the following passuk to the fetus (Tehillim 58, 4): **“זורו רשעים מרחם”—the wicked are estranged from the womb.** Indeed, the child she gave birth to was a rasha.

In light of these incidents, the Maharsha questions Rebbe’s decision to concur with Antoninu—that the

yetzer hara does begin to influence a human being until birth. This second case especially seems to contradict this conclusion. After all, Rabbi Chanina went so far as to label this fetus a rasha while it was still in utero, implying that it was already under the influence of the yetzer hara.

The Maharsha resolves this apparent contradiction by suggesting that the fetus itself is not yet possessed by a yetzer hara; it is, however, being influenced by its mother's yetzer hara prior to its birth. If it had a yetzer hara of its own, then it would kick violently in an attempt to come out prematurely. Furthermore, the mother's yetzer hara only makes the fetus accede to her cravings but does not cause it to do anything to harm her.

The Maharsha remains puzzled by the assertion that Eisav struggled to exit the womb whenever Rivkah passed by a house of avodah-zarah. For, this would certainly be an indication that Eisav was already influenced by his yetzer hara from the moment he was formed. Clearly, this was not due to his mother Rivkah's yetzer hara; she had no involvement or interest in avodah-zarah. He leaves the matter unanswered.

We can now begin to comprehend the extreme anguish of Rivkah Imeinu. She was wise enough to know that a yetzer hara only exerts influence after a child is born. So, it confounded her how a fetus while still in utero could have such a strong affinity for avodah-zarah. Hence, she reached the same conclusion as the Maharsha did initially. The fetus within her was being influenced by her yetzer hara; her yetzer hara was motivating Eisav to go to houses of avodah-zarah.

This realization shook her to her core and prompted the heartfelt exclamation: "אם כן למה זה אנכי"—what is wrong with me?! Since I have not yet rid myself thoroughly of my father's avodah-zarah, I should not be praying for a pregnancy. I am not yet worthy of giving birth to and raising children who are devoted to the belief in the one G-d. To correct these personal flaws: "ותלך לדרוש את ה'". As Rashi explains, she went to the Beis Midrash of Shem. In keeping with this discussion, she sought counsel and wished to learn and strengthen her emunah in Hashem, so

that she would be a fit mother, totally removed from any trace of avodah-zarah that could infect a fetus.

The Fabulous Explanation of the Maharal and the Nezer HaKodesh

Following this fascinating path, we will now explain how HKB"H consoled Rivkah by informing her: **"Two nations are in your womb; and two regimes from your insides will be separated; and one regime will become strong from the other regime; and the elder will serve the younger."** In Gur Aryeh, the Maharal of Prague, ztz"l, was also bothered by the question of the Maharsha regarding Rashi's comment. What was causing Eisav to struggle to exit the womb, so that he could attend places where avodah-zarah was worshipped? How could he have already been under the influence of the yetzer hara? He answers that it had nothing to do with the yetzer hara. Eisav was inherently wicked!

As a loyal servant in the presence of his master, I would like to elaborate on the answer of the Maharal. In the Nezer HaKodesh on the Midrash (B.R. 34, 12), the divine kabbalist Rabbi Michel of Galuna, ztz"l, declares unequivocally: **"Most certainly, a holy mouth like Rebbe's, his remarks were never said in vain (nonsense)."** This begs the question: Rabeinu HaKadosh initially opined, likely based on what he had been taught by his Rabbis, that the yetzer hara enters and begins to exert its influence on a person in utero. So, how does this gibe with his ultimate concession to Antoninus that the yetzer hara only enters a person at birth?

To answer this question, the Nezer HaKodesh goes to great lengths to reconcile a contradiction concerning the location of the yetzer hara. On the one hand, several sources indicate that the yetzer hara exists in man's physical body, in a person's heart, the source of all human craving, as it is written (ibid. 8, 21): **"כי יצר לב האדם רע—מנעוריו—since the 'yetzer' of man's heart is evil from his youth.** This notion is supported by what is expounded in the Mishnah (Berachos 54a): **"ואהבת את ה' אלקיך בכל לבבך,** **"בשני יצריך ביצר טוב וביצר הרע"—"you shall love Hashem, your G-d, with all your heart"—"with all your heart"**

means with both of your yetzers, with the yetzer tov and the yetzer hara. They also taught (ibid. 61a): **”יצר”**—**the yetzer hara resembles a fly and sits between the two gateways of the heart.** This is a consequence of man’s corporeal being and natural cravings.

On the other hand, other sources indicate that the yetzer hara is a malach. This is supported by another teaching in the Gemara (B.B. 16a): **”הוא שטן, הוא יצר הרע, הוא”**—**he is the Satan; he is the yetzer hara; he is the Malach-Hamaves.** The Gemara elaborates (ibid.): **”במתניתא תנא, יורד ומתעה, ועולה ומרגיז, נוטל רשות ונוטל נשמה”**—**a Tanna taught in a Baraisa: It (the Satan) descends and lures people into sin; it ascends and incites (G-d’s wrath against the sinner); it takes permission (to kill the sinner) and takes his soul.** Rashi explains that at first when it descends to lure and mislead people, it is called the **”yetzer hara”**; afterwards, when it ascends to prosecute the person before the heavenly court, it is called the **”Satan”**; subsequently, when it receives permission from above to kill the sinner and it descends to take his neshamah, it is called the **”Malach Hamaves.”** In fact, the Midrashim and the Zohar teach that the yetzer hara is a malach.

The Nezer HaKodesh explains this discrepancy as follows: In truth, both are true of the yetzer hara. He is both an internal enemy and an external enemy. Man’s internal yetzer hara located in his flesh and bones stems from the corruption and perversion of his corporeal being. Additionally, man has an external yetzer hara that is an actual malach. It and its forces are well-known and are depicted by the passuk (Tehillim 12, 9): **”סביב רשעים”**—**the wicked walk on every side.** They are a constant bad influence aimed at leading man astray from the paths of life to the paths of death.

The Internal Yetzer HaRa Is Present in the Fetus the External Yetzer HaRa Only Arrives at Birth

With this understanding, the Nezer HaKodesh explains how both viewpoints of Rabeinu HaKadosh and Antoninus—concerning when the yetzer hara begins

influencing a person—go hand-in-hand marvelously. Here is a summary of his explanation:

Undoubtedly both statements of Rebbe have merit. As I explained, a person has two yetzers—one inside him due to the nature of his corporeal self, which is the source of his cravings, and a second outside of him, a malach that was created to stand over him and lead him astray—from the paths of life to the paths leading to death. As such, the internal yetzer hara, which arises from the nature of a corporeal being with powerful cravings, arrives immediately at the time of formation—like the opinion of Rebbe. But the external yetzer hara that comes to cause his good intentions to fail, only arrives with the birth but not in his mother’s womb; so that he will not kick his mother and come out prematurely—like the opinion of Antoninus. The internal yetzer hara, the force of desire, does not possess this property; its nature is not to cause damage to something that is not for the sake of its pleasure.

I believe that we can provide corroboration for the enlightening explanation of the Nezer HaKodesh from a teaching in the Gemara (Niddah 30b): **”דרש רבי שמלאי למה”** הולד דומה במעי אמו, לפנקס שמקופל... ואוכל ממה שאמו אוכלת ושותה ממה שאמו שותה... וגר דלוק לו על ראשו, וצופה ומביט מסוף העולם ועד סופו, שנאמר בהלו גרו עלי ראשי... ואין לך ימים שאדם שרוי בטובה יותר מאותן הימים, שנאמר מי יתנני כירחי קדם... ומלמדין אותו כל התורה כולה... וכיון שבא לאויר העולם בא מלאך וסטרו על פיו ומשכחו כל Rabbi Simlai expounded: **To what is a fetus comparable in its mother’s womb? To a folded ledger . . . it eats of what its mother eats and drinks of what its mother drinks . . . and a lamp is lit above its head, and it peers out and sees from one end of the world to the other end, as it states (Iyov 29, 3): “When his lamp shone above my head, by its light I was able to walk in the dark” . . . And there are no days during which a person experiences more bliss than during those days (in his mother’s womb), as it states (ibid. 2): “If only I could relive the months of earlier times” . . . And they teach him (the unborn child) the entire Torah . . . but as soon as he emerges into the air of the world, a malach**

comes and strikes him on his mouth causing him to forget the entire Torah.

In his Chiddushei Aggados (ibid.), in relation to the teaching that **“a malach comes and strikes him on his mouth,”** the Maharsha states explicitly that the external yetzer hara, who is also the Malach Hamaves, comes to a person at birth and causes him to forget all of the Torah that he was taught in utero. In fact, he deduces this from the very same passuk cited by Rebbe to justify the opinion of Antoninus: **“לפתח חטאת רובץ”**—**sin (the yetzer hara) crouches at the door** (the exit from the birth canal). Thus, everything fits together very nicely.

This explains the response of HKB”H to Rivkah’s plea of anguish fabulously. She was perplexed that her fetus was struggling vigorously while still inside her to get out to places of avodah-zarah, even though it did not have a yetzer hara, yet. She concluded mistakenly that this was on account of her own yetzer hara. This prompted her to exclaim: **“אם כן למה זה אנכי”**—how is it possible that I still have a yetzer hara of avodah-zarah inside me?

Therefore, to console Rivkah and allay her concerns, so that she could rest assured that she was totally free of any yetzer hara of avodah-zarah: **Hashem informed her: “Two nations are in your womb; and two regimes from your insides will be separated; and one regime will become strong from the other regime; and the elder will serve the younger.”** In other words, she learned that she was carrying twins; one of them was a tzaddik by nature drawn to kedushah, while other one was a rasha by nature drawn to tumah. Thus, she learned that the latter’s strong affinity for avodah-zarah was not on account of her yetzer hara, but rather due to that fetus’ own, internal yetzer hara.

“The elder will serve the younger”: Antoninus Is Destined to Wait on Rabeinu HaKadosh

We can now explain the rest of HKB”H’s remark to Rivkah. In the Gemara (A.Z. 10b), Chazal describe the extraordinary relationship that existed between Antoninu, the Roman ruler, and Rabeinu HaKadosh:

“כל יומא הוה משמש לרבי, מאכיל ליה, משקה ליה, כי הוה בעי רבי למיסק לפוריא הוה גחין קמי פוריא אמר ליה סק עילואי לפוריך אמר לאו אורח ארעא לזלזולי במלכותא כולי האי, אמר מי ישימני מצע תחתך לעולם הבא.”

Every day, he would wait upon Rebbe; he would serve him food and serve him drink. When Rebbe wished to climb onto his bed, he (Antoninus) would bend down in front of the bed, and say to Rebbe, “Climb up on me to your bed.” He (Rebbe) replied, “It is improper to treat the throne so disrespectfully.” He (Antoninus) replied, “If only I would be the mat beneath you in Olam HaBa.”

According to the Toras Chaim (ibid.), this scenario constituted a fulfillment of the prophetic words HKB”H spoke to Rivkah: **“ורב יעבוד צעיר”**—**the elder will serve the younger.** This intriguing interpretation is presented in greater detail in the writings of the great Ben Ish Chai in his sefer Ben Yehoyada on this Gemara. He cites the Gaon Chida, who wrote that Antoninus was the good part of Eisav, while Rabeinu HaKadosh was a “nitzotz” of Yaakov Avinu, a”h. He came now to make amends for the mistreatment and wrongs he had done previously to Yaakov Avinu. Hence, he waited upon him; that was his tikun. For this reason, Rabeinu HaKadosh allowed him to do these things. Even though this relationship violated the norms of proper behavior down on earth, they both understood that this relationship was necessary to achieve a tikun according to the laws of heaven.

In this vein, the Ben Yehoyada interprets Eisav’s proposal to Yaakov (Bereishis 33, 12): **נסעה ונלכה**—**travel on and let us go; I will proceed alongside you.** We was saying that they should travel on from Olam HaZeh and move on to their next gilgul. After that, **I will proceed alongside you** in all future generations. In other words, Eisav was saying that the good inside him would serve the good. He did not know that he was uttering a prophecy.

Let us now return to the passage in the Gemara we began with. Antoninus and Rebbe had a dispute regarding when the yetzer hara begins to exert its influence on a human being—when the fetus is formed or at the time of birth. In the end, Rebbe concedes and says: **“This matter did Antoninus teach me.”** Since he was the good spark of Eisav, he was able to attest to the fact that when Eisav struggled to exit Rivkah’s womb, it was not on account of the malach of the yetzer hara but was on account of Eisav’s evil nature, his internal yetzer hara.

It behooves us to add a key point. Since Antoninus was the good part of Eisav’s neshamah, he was able to prevent Eisav from exiting his mother’s womb prematurely to worship avodah-zarah. After Eisav was born, however, the malach, his external yetzer hara, Eisav’s guardian angel, joined him. At that point, Antoninus was powerless to prevent him from worshipping avodah-zarah. In this

merit, Antoninus was privileged to abstain from avodah-zarah and to convert.

It was for this reason that Rabeinu HaKadosh accepted the viewpoint of Antoninus that the yetzer hara, the malach, only comes to a person at birth. Therefore, as proof, Rebbe quotes the passuk: **“לפתח חטאת רובץ”**. In other words, the yetzer hara the malach waits at the doorway to the birth canal anticipating the birth, so that it can cause the newborn to forget all the Torah that it learned in utero. This then is our sacred task in Olam HaZeh—to withstand the yetzer hara by studying Torah and restoring the Torah that we learned in utero. By accomplishing this, the promise of HKB”H will be fulfilled (Kiddushin 30b): **“I have created the yetzer hara, and I have created Torah as its antidote. If you engage in Torah-study, you will not be delivered into its hand.”**



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