

The Inner Adversary

THERE IS ONE OTHER IMPORTANT FACTOR of the inner life that the Mussar masters identify that not only explains how you got to where you are in your life but also prepares you to engage with your soul curriculum: embedded within each of us is an inner adversary.

Even if you know what is good, right, and desirable, it isn't so simple just to act that way. No sooner does a notion to do something good come into your mind or heart than up pops an objection. It might be a contrary thought, or a feeling, or a desire pulling you in the opposite direction. In whatever form it will arise, when you try to improve the soul-traits that are on your spiritual curriculum you can expect to face a challenge to doing the better thing.

The Jewish sages give a name to this negative impulse. They call it the *yetzer ha'ra*, the inclination to evil. We all have this inclination and it challenges us, which is why it exists. We are born with free will and can choose to do good or bad, but whenever we try to do something that stretches us in the direction of good, we need to expect to encounter this inner resistance arising from the shadows. We have an inner inclination to elevate and purify ourselves—that's the *yetzer ha'tov*, the impulse to do good—and what stands in our way is the built-in adversary, the *yetzer ha'ra*.

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler has given us a very helpful concept to help us understand this give-and-take, this push and pull that we experience whenever we try to do something that reflects our ambition to elevate ourselves. He identifies what he calls the *bechirah*-points in each of us.¹ The word *bechirah* means "choice" in Hebrew, and refers to our free will. There is, Rabbi Dessler says, an inner battle line that is drawn right at those places where choice is very alive for you, where you really could go either way with a decision. He illustrates what he means by referring to a real battle:

When two armies are locked in battle, fighting takes place only at the battlefield. Territory behind the lines of one army is under that army's control and little or no resistance need be expected there. A similar situation prevails in respect of territory behind the lines of the other army. If one side gains a victory at the front and pushes the enemy back, the position of the battlefield will have changed. In fact, therefore, fighting takes place only at one location.

This image describes the situation we ourselves regularly face whenever we try to do anything that involves an exercise of choice. If it is an easy choice where our values and appetites are well established, we don't experience any struggle at all. Nor is it any harder when the choice is so far outside our interests or potential; then we aren't even tempted. Rabbi Dessler zeroes in: "Free will is exercised and a valid choice made only on the borderline between the forces of good and the forces of evil within that person."

To illustrate, he gives the example of two people who are very confirmed in their relationship to material goods. One is a professional thief raised among thieves and robbers. This person has absolutely no inner struggle over whether or not to steal because that's his established way of life: "For him, whether or not to steal does not present any *behira* [*bechirah*] at all," says Rabbi Dessler. But still, this person retains the potential to ascend spiritually, and so somewhere within him free will is alive and choices are real. Rabbi Dessler wonders, if this thief were to be discovered in the midst of a robbery, would he shoot his way out of the jam and run the risk of killing someone? If that question would be a real struggle for him, and the outcome uncertain, then this would define one of his *bechirah*-points, "where for him the forces of good and evil, truth and untruth, are evenly balanced."

The other person Rabbi Dessler cites is someone brought up in a good home with strong moral values. This person would not have the slightest temptation to steal a penny. Does that mean that he or she has no *bechirah*-point where the tests of spiritual ascent are going to be faced? No, this person must have challenges, too, through which he or she can elevate spiritually. While theft is not a real possibility here, in this case the *bechirah*-point might refer to another aspect of relationship to property, like how much charity he or she gives, and whether giving is done generously and with a pleasant demeanor.

So we all have *bechirah*-points where we find choices to be challenging, and the reality is that we could go either way. Your *bechirah*-points define the front line in your spiritual struggle. On one side is the territory of the *yetzer ha'tov* (good inclination) and on the other that of the *yetzer ha'ra* (evil inclination).

Rabbi Dessler concludes his discussion by advising us that this *bechirah*-point does not remain static:

With each good choice successfully carried out, the person rises higher in spiritual level; that is, things that were previously in the line of battle are now in the area controlled by the *yetzer ha'tov* and actions done in that area can be undertaken without struggle and without *behira* [*bechirah*]. And so in the other direction. Giving in to the *yetzer ha'ra* pushes back the frontier of the good, and an act which previously cost one a struggle with one's conscience will now be done without *behira* at all.

So just as your spiritual curriculum is composed of a set of soul-traits that are particularly relevant to you as an individual, so too do you have a distinctive set of *bechirah*-points. Think of those choices that often confront you, when you really do experience the possibility of going either way. Do you waver over the second piece of dessert? Is reaching into your purse or wallet to give charity a struggle with an uncertain outcome? Do you know you should call or visit a sick friend, and yet you hesitate and vacillate over actually doing it? Do you look at the sink full of dishes and lean this way and that way and back again and go all around over whether the responsibility is yours?

You may see yourself reflected in some of these examples, or you may be able to name your own. Wherever your *bechirah*-points may be, rest assured that you have them. They represent not only places of uncertainty in your behavior but also openings where you have the greatest potential to ascend spiritually. It is important to recognize that each choice you make can be a rung on the ladder of your spiritual ascent (or, unfortunately, the opposite).

Just as your spiritual curriculum and set of *bechirah*-points are distinctive to you, so does your inner adversary, your *yetzer ha'ra*, come at you with challenges that are uniquely tailored just to you. You're only

going to be tempted or pushed in regard to traits and choices that are personally challenging for you. Perhaps you know you should be more patient with your spouse or children, and you want to be, but as soon as you set that resolution, whose inner voice is it that points out to you how outrageous it is that they are so slow or late? You want to open your hand in charity, but as soon as you make the first move to reach into your pocket, where does the thought originate that wonders whether you will have enough for yourself? You decide to lose a few pounds, so who is it who tells you that having only one more won't matter?

Although our spiritual ancestors named this inner adversary as the inclination to evil, their descriptions tell us that this impulse isn't exactly "evil" as we ordinarily understand that term. What they are alerting us to is made clearer by some of the lessons they passed down to us.

In a famous story, the rabbis once captured the *yetzer ha'ra* and confined it in a big pot.² They prepared to kill it, but then they noticed that throughout the kingdom, no one went to work, and even the chickens had stopped laying eggs. The rabbis had to let it go.

In another source text, the lesson concludes, "If not for the evil impulse no one would build a house, marry, have children, or engage in trade."³

These references tell us that despite the literal translation of its name, the *yetzer ha'ra* isn't an impulse to do harm that dooms us all. Rather, they are pointing to the inner drives that arise from our lower selves. The drives themselves are certainly not appraised as bad; in fact, they are necessary and useful for human life. But whenever you try to control or overrule those drives because of an intention of your higher nature, or when one of those drives becomes exaggerated, you will have a struggle on your hands. The *yetzer ha'ra* will do everything in its power to subvert your higher self and to influence you to indulge your desires. Hence the goal is not to try to destroy the *yetzer ha'ra* but to control it and apply it for good. Ben Zoma asked, "Who is strong?" His answer is: "Whoever controls their evil inclination."⁴

In our uniqueness, you and I have desires that have their own distinctive weave and coloration. And your *yetzer ha'ra* is matched up to your desires, inch for inch, stitch for stitch. Your *yetzer ha'ra* is perfectly contoured to provide exactly the challenges you must overcome in order to grow spiritually. And just as there is an infinite range of human personalities, the *yetzer ha'ra* comes in an infinite number of variations. In every

case, though, the *yetzer ha'ra* will perfectly match a person's spiritual curriculum. Like the settings of your soul-traits, your *yetzer ha'ra* is an inevitable companion on the way of the soul. You are well advised to get to know yours.

Do you? Are you familiar with the inner impulses that push you to do what you know you shouldn't, or keep you from doing what you should? Take a moment to consider for yourself.

Your *yetzer ha'ra* may push you to do things you really shouldn't. "Go ahead," it says. "Who's counting? Who will see? How could one hurt? You deserve it." It will flatter, cajole, seduce, or come up with whatever it takes to induce you to step over the line.

Or your *yetzer ha'ra* will be the voice that tells you not to do what you know you should. "Don't bother," it will counsel. "What's in it for you? Surely it's somebody else's turn." Or even more negatively, "You don't deserve it, so don't even try. You're bound to fail, so don't even start."

Rabbi Elijah of Vilna, known as the Vilna Ga'on,⁵ writes that the *yetzer ha'ra* does not try to seduce you to do something that is outright sinful because in that case, you'd never take the bait. Rather, the *yetzer ha'ra* tries to get you to take only one small step down a wrong road, which it can do by convincing you that this first step is actually a good and righteous thing. For example, the *yetzer ha'ra* won't try to entice a person who keeps kosher to outright eat pork, because that is not likely a point of vulnerability. Instead, it would try to entice that person to eat roasted kosher meat on Passover, which is not to be done, and it would whisper convincingly, "You'll really enjoy the festive meal so much more." Once the *yetzer ha'ra* has succeeded in that small measure, it will continue enticing the person farther and farther down the path of transgression.⁶

Rabbi Yosef Yozel Hurwitz of Novarodok alerts us to the way the *yetzer ha'ra* works by exploiting what he calls "a righteous opening."⁷ His example is Cain, who ultimately killed his brother, Abel. His first step toward that terrible act came with his reaction to God's acceptance of Abel's sacrifice but not his. Cain wanted his sacrifice to be accepted, too, which was a positive and righteous kind of jealousy. But it was still jealousy, and that's what created a righteous opening for the *yetzer ha'ra*. He was led along until he committed the first recorded fratricide.

Some Mussar teachers talk about overcoming your *yetzer ha'ra*. Others speak of befriending it or redirecting its energy. However it is approached,

the task of taming the adversary is not to be underestimated. Be forewarned that the foe is wily, unruly, deceptive. It doesn't play by our rules. And the better we get at dealing with it, the more subtle does it render its resistance. It is the proverbial trickster.

The *yetzer ha'ra* makes sure it is hard to overcome. When he was a child, the future Chassidic master Eliezer of Dzikov was scolded by his father for some misdeed. "But what can I do if my *yetzer ha'ra* tempts me?" the child asked.

"Learn from your *yetzer ha'ra*," his father said. "Look how diligent he is."

"Yes," said Eliezer, "but my *yetzer ha'ra* has no *yetzer ha'ra* to distract him!"

The Mussar masters want you to be very alert to the nature of your *yetzer ha'ra* and particularly to how it operates in your life. They want you to be aware that it can pop up at any moment and that the struggle to overcome its influence goes on for a lifetime. They want each of us to learn to be skillful in dealing with our own *yetzer ha'ra*.

And they warn us that despite our best efforts—and never has a civilization been more inventive and effective at this than ours—our lower self, with its bundle of self-preserving and other urges, is not susceptible to being anesthetized. Nor will it succumb to bludgeoning. Those efforts only temporarily send this stealthy psycho-terrorist back to its cave, where it gorges on our foolishness and plots its survival and our downfall. With every blow we deliver, its subterranean force expands, until one day it reemerges, either as a stomping monster or as an equally deadly foul gas, seeping through the cracks in who we'd like to think we are.

That you can expect never to be freed of the inner adversary is conveyed in a story about the eighteenth-century Vilna Ga'on. One day, his students told him, "Rebbe, we wish we could have your *yetzer ha'ra*." He answered them, "Oh no you don't." And he cited as proof the saying in the Talmud, "The greater the person, the greater the *yetzer ha'ra*."⁸ If we are wise, we should not even want to be freed of this inclination. As you advance spiritually, your *yetzer ha'ra* continues to offer its challenges. That's so you can continue to grow.