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The Good Yeitzer Hara

The tzadik Rebbe Naftali of Ropshitz was known for his sharp wit and holy insight. The Ropshitzer’s son, “Leizer”, later the great Reb Eliezer of Dzikov, inherited his father’s penetrating sense of humor.

As children often do, one day the rambunctious Leizer pulled a risky and mischievous prank — and for this he was admonished by his father, the Rebbe. “But Tatty, it’s not my fault! I have a very active *yeitzer ha-ra* (evil inclination) that pulled me into it... I just wasn’t able to withstand its temptation.”

“Exactly,” said his father, the Ropshitzer.

“So you should learn from your *yeitzer ha-ra*: look how seriously he takes his *avodah*, carrying out his duty of leading us astray exactly as he is commanded to do, consistently, relentlessly, day after day.”

“It’s true,” countered the young Leizer, “my *yeitzer ha-ra* is indeed consistent in doing his job. But you see, my *yeitzer ha-ra* doesn’t have a *yeitzer ha-ra* preventing it from staying focused and tempting it away from *avodas Hashem*, like I do!

And the Ropshitzer smiled.

.....

Following the destructive *Mabul*, when the Earth was finally dry, Noach emerged from the *Teivah* and offered a *korban* to Hashem:

וַיִּרַח ה' אֶת־רִיחַ הַנְּיִיחִים וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־לִבּוֹ לֹא־אֶסַף לְקַלֵּל עוֹד אֶת־הָאָדָמָה בְּעִבּוֹר הָאָדָם כִּי יֵצֵר לֵב הָאָדָם רָע מִנְּעוּרָיו וְלֹא־אֶסַף עוֹד לְהַכּוֹת אֶת־כָּל־חַי בְּאֶשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי:

“And Hashem smelled the pleasant aroma, and said to Himself, “Never again will I curse the earth because of man, **since the devisings of man’s mind are evil from his youth**; nor will I ever again destroy every living being, as I have done” (*Bereishis*, 8:20-21)

Rashi brings a Midrash: מִנְּעוּרָיו ‘from his youth’ is written without (חסר) the letter *vav*, implying that משננער לצאת ממעי אמו, “from the time that a person ‘shakes

OU Israel
mourns the passing of
**HaRav HaGaon Dr.
Moshe Dovid Tendler zt”l**

He was an expert in Jewish law and medical ethics and his views shaped the Orthodox community's views in this area.

Long time Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshiva University and biology professor. Beloved Communal Leader in Monsey, NY

ת.נ.צ.ב.ה




himself', when emerging from his mother's womb, the evil inclination is placed within him."

The students of the Baal Shem Tov defined the *yeitzer ha-ra* as simply energy and movement, the engine behind any impetus or desire that makes us 'go'. Far from being inherently evil, these passions and drives are what makes us human and they form the core of our creative ambition. Without the energy of passion and drive, "no man would build a house, take a wife and create a family" (*Bereishis Rabbah*, 9:7).

When Rav Yitzchok Hutner, ztl, was a teen, his rebbe found him learning by himself, and asked, "Yitzchok, you don't have a chavrusa?"

"I'm learning with my *yeitzer ha-ra*!" he smiled.

His rebbe pressed him again: "Why not learn with your *yeitzer tov*?"

"Rebbe, my *yeitzer tov* never shows up on time to *seider*. But I can always count on my *yeitzer ha-ra*!"

Asks Rav David Fohrman, the brilliant contemporary *parshan*, "If the evil inclination is good, how is it so bad?" Our passions are not evil in and of themselves, rather they constitute a powerful potential life-giving force, and they are the source of all connectivity and relationship. When the awesome power of passion is focussed and directed

constructively, it can bring redemption. Yet, left unchecked, the gravitational spiritual pull of the world can drag passion down into destructive outcomes.

This is why we need to learn from our *yeitzer ha-ra*, and use it in our service of Hashem. In the *Shema*, we are commanded to love Hashem '*b'chol levavechem*' with all your hearts, in the plural form. The Gemara infers the meaning: love God with both of your inclinations: your *yeitzer ha-tov* as well as our *yeitzer ha-ra* (*Berachos*, 54a). We are asked to use all of our *kochos ha-nefesh* and passions in His service.

Rebbe Shlomo Karliner, zy'a, would rally to the defense of the Jewish people by referencing the above mentioned *pasuk* from our sedra: "You, Ribbono Shel Olam, have already admitted that 'the devisings of man's mind are evil from his youth'; what can you expect of the people? They need to eat, sleep and love!"

The Divine commitment to never again destroy the earth as a result of our wrongdoings is, so to speak, God's way of smiling at his 'rambunctious' children. ■

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