



THE PERSON

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB

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IN THE PARSHA

Easy Spirituality

The French poet Baudelaire once remarked that the devil's greatest success is his ability to convince us that he does not exist.

Whereas Judaism does not believe in the devil quite as Baudelaire does, it does believe that there is a “devilish” force called the *yetzer hara* within each of us, and that that force works in very subtle ways. At the same time, with ambivalence, we definitely do tend to believe that this *yetzer* does not exist.

Jewish writings through the ages have debated the nature of this force. All these writings ultimately trace back to a verse in this week's Torah portion, *Parshat Noach*: “The devising of man's mind is evil from his youth.” (*Genesis* 8:21)

And to a similar verse in last week's Torah portion: “The Lord saw how great was man's wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but

evil all the time.” (*Genesis* 6:5)

Thus, there most assuredly is an inclination for evil in each of us. He or she who wishes to live the life of a good person is well advised to guard against this natural inclination. This *yetzer*-force rarely commands us directly to do what is wrong. Instead, it tries to craftily delude us into thinking that what is wrong and evil is right and good.

A favorite strategy for the *yetzer* is to persuade us that it seeks the same ends and objectives as God does, but that alternate ways of achieving those ends are also legitimate. Take spirituality, for example. How does one achieve a sense of spirituality?

For Judaism, spirituality and the emotions which accompany it can only be achieved through hard work: prayer, study, sacrifice, and above all, charity and compassion. No easy “grace!” The *yetzer*, while not denying the value of spirituality, tempts us with short cuts, and cheap and ersatz methods to achieve the same results as the more arduous methods prescribed by the Torah.

A wonderful illustration of this dynamic is found in this week's Torah portion, just after the story of the great Flood. Noah and his family are beginning anew, rebuilding their lives, rebuilding the world. What is the first thing Noah does? He plants a vineyard. His grapes grow and ripen, he makes wine and drinks it and gets drunk.

What prompted Noah to make wine his first priority? Let me suggest the following

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imaginary scenario to answer that question. Noah walked with God. He enjoyed the sense of spirituality for which many of us yearn. He experienced a spiritual "high." In the past, he achieved that level of spirituality by virtue of hard work: obedience, construction of the Ark, gathering the animals of the world, tending to them, offering sacrifices. Along came Noah's *yetzer-force*, and said, "Noah! There must be an easier way! You can achieve the same spiritual high, the same sense of wholeness and holiness without all that work. All it will take is a few drinks of one of God's own juices. Plant a vineyard, make some wine and drink it and you will feel all the good feelings you felt before, and then some."

For, you see, the *yetzer*, or if you wish the devil, knows of the connection between addiction and spirituality.

How well I remember the 1960s, and the many gifted spiritual seekers who resorted to alcohol and more potent substances to generate moods of spirituality.

Judaism cautions us not to be seduced by facile techniques, even in the service of achieving higher and holier states of conscientiousness. That is why the Torah shifts next week into the story of Abraham, whose spirituality was based on service, on the courageous search for social justice, and on compassionate concern for others in need. In short, Abraham was dedicated to the very arduous methods that Noah sought to circumvent by drink. ■

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