

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Ki Teitzei

The month of Elul is underway. Rabbis are hard at work on their High Holiday sermons, shofar blowers are dusting off their instruments, and Jews around the world are preparing heart and soul for the Days of Awe. Introspection is the call of the hour.

As we approach the Days of Judgment and Atonement, our life-long struggle with negative impulses comes to the fore. G-d knows that nobody's perfect, but if the High Holy Days say anything at all, they insist that we engage in personal evaluation and self-improvement as Jews. And if we are to hold any hope for success we must begin with the sage advice of the military: "Know your enemy." We were created with an evil inclination and it is our responsibility to identify it, confront it, and defeat it. But what is the nature of this *yetzer harah* (evil inclination) that resides in our hearts? What is it about sin that's so tempting?

Understanding man's strange propensity for evil is no simple matter, but we turn to our parsha for insight. Ki Teitzei begins with a law that at first glance appears to be at odds with everything the Torah stands for: "When you wage war against your enemies, G-d will give you victory over them and you will take captives. If you see a beautiful woman among the prisoners and desire her, you may take her as a wife. You bring her to your home..." (Devarim 21:10-12). This is exactly the kind of behavior that we have come to expect the Torah to forbid! Why would G-d give license to indulge in such base desires?

The Talmud explains, "The Torah is actually speaking here *against* the evil inclination. It is better that the Jews eat rotten kosher meat than rotten non-kosher meat" (Kiddushin 21b-22a). In other words,



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bloodlust is aroused in the violence of battle and people behave badly, to say the least. The Torah does not ask of man more than he is capable of, so instead of commanding the impossible, the Torah creates guidelines which recognize and direct man's passions.

We must not build our understanding of Judaism on selective readings. The Torah consistently demands that we reign in our passions and avoid indulgences. However, this one exception does teach us to be realistic when dealing with the evil inclination. When we develop personal resolutions for climbing the spiritual l

adder this Elul, we should keep in mind that if we are not practical then our quest for self improvement will meet the same fate as most New Year's resolutions. Long forgotten well before Chanukah.

Continuing its analysis of this law, the Talmud points out that the words "you bring her to your home" indicate that one may not be intimate with this woman during the war. And even after the war is over, relations are forbidden until after her month-long mourning period for her lost parents (21:13-14). *Tosafot* (Kiddushin, ad loc.) asks the obvious question. How can the Talmud claim that permitting the beautiful captive circumvents the evil inclination if relations are forbidden for such a long period? How is permitting the marriage of a captive after the war going to alleviate the passions of soldiers during the war?

The strange nature of man's desires provides the answer to our question. *Tosafot*, quoting *Rabbenu Tam* (d. 1171), utilizes the Talmudic expression of *pat b'salo*, i.e. "bread in the basket." This is the idea that people are only content when they have the security of "bread in their basket." When something is



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forbidden or unattainable, then man is filled with desire for it. But as soon as it's available and free for the taking, his passions are cooled. That is the philosophy behind this law. By creating a framework that makes the beautiful captive marriage material, even if it'll take some time, the Torah ruins the soldier's excitement of being with her. This is what the Talmud meant when it said that this law undermines the evil inclination.

Our Parsha is underlining the absurdity of man's passions. A good percentage of man's desire for evil is simply the thrill of the crime. Permit the crime and the desire is gone. A disturbing thought indeed.

Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810) illustrated this idea with a parable. What is the nature of the *yetzer harah*? To what can man's narcissistic desires be compared? A guy comes up to you with a clenched fist and he says, 'What you want is in my hand,' and then he takes off. You run after him, and after a long chase you finally catch him. You pry open his hand, only to find nothing inside. This is nature of man's evil inclination.

It's all a lie. The *yetzer harah* promises the world and gives nothing in return. But we spend a good part of our lives in hot pursuit. G-d placed both good and evil in the heart of man. The month of Elul is the time to muster our love for mitzvot and goodness into battle against our negative traits. And in this quest to become better Jews in time for the Days of Awe, it helps to remember that the *yetzer hara* is a liar.

Shabbat Shalom!

