

## Angels and Demons: Managing Our Good & Evil Inclinations

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In the comic books, the bad angel stands on one shoulder with a pitchfork and the good angel on the other with a halo. In Judaism, we call these two influences the “*yetzer ha-tov*”, the inclination to good and the “*yetzer ha-ra*” the inclination to evil. But those urges and desires are not imposed upon us from without; they are part of who we are and how Hashem created us. If God created us this way, there must also be a way to succeed in life with both the good and evil parts within us. With your *chavruta*, make your way through the following few sources. (*The sources should take you around 30 minutes to read through and discuss.*)

### STEP 1: Read these 2 verses about the creation of human beings from B'reisheet 1:27 and 2:7:

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֱדָמָה | אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצַלְמֵ אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם:

(1:27) And Elohim created mankind in (h)is image, in the image of Elohim He created him, male and female He created them.

וַיִּצְרָה ' אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם עָפָר מִן־הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נֶשְׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה:

(2:7) And Hashem Elohim formed mankind as dust from the ground and He blew a soul of life into his nostrils, and the man became a living spirit.

#### *Navigator: A few starter questions to discuss:*

- *What does it mean that Elohim created us in “his image”? Is it “His” image or “his” image?*
- *Note that the first word of the second source (vayetzter, וַיִּצְרָה) has two yods. This is the only time it is ever spelled this way. We will see below what chazal thought was the meaning of these two yods. If each “yod” stands for something, what else in this verse might they correspond to?*
- *In pasuk 2:7, What do you think is the difference between “soul” (neshama) and spirit (nefesh)?*

### STEP 2: Now, read what God says about the human beings He created, in B'reisheet 6:5 and 8:21. For context, this is right before God brings the Flood, the mabbul.

וַיִּרְא ה' כִּי רַבָּה רָעַת הָאָדָם בְּאָרְצוֹ וְכָל־יִצְרָר מִחֻשְׁבֹּת לִבּוֹ רַק רַע כָּל־הַיּוֹם:

6:5 - *And Hashem saw that great was the evil of mankind and that all the inclinations of the thoughts of his heart were only evil all day long.*

*mankind, for the inclination of the heart of man is evil from ... - 8:21*  
*his youth*

Navigator: As opposed to praising human beings for being created in Hashem's image, this view seems to see them – and their yetzer -- as evil and bad from the beginning. Perhaps this next source, from the Talmud, Sukka 52a, can balance the two views:

אתא ההוא סבא תנא ליה כל הגדול מחבירו יצרו גדול הימנו אמר רבי יצחק יצרו של אדם מתגבר עליו בכל יום שנאמר (בראשית ו, ה) רק רע כל היום אמר רבי שמעון בן לקיש יצרו של אדם מתגבר עליו בכל יום ומבקש להמיתו שנאמר (תהלים לז, לב) צופה רשע לצדיק ומבקש להמיתו ואלמלא הקב"ה שעוזר לו אינו יכול לו שנאמר (תהלים לז, לג) ה' לא יעזבנו בידו ולא ירשיענו בהשפטו

*...Whoever is greater than his friend, his evil inclination is greater [as well.] Said R. Yitzchak: the inclination of a man overpowers him every day as it says "only evil all day long". Said R. Shimon ben Lakish: the inclination of a man overpowers him every day and tries to kill him and were it not that the Holy One, Blessed be He, assists him - he would not make it, as it says "God will not abandon him into its hand and he will not incriminate us in his judgment." ...*

Navigator: The greater a person's good yetzer, the more evil yetzer they have in them. These things should be in natural balance, but the gemara seems pessimistic about this; it is only with Hashem's help that our good yetzer can prevail.

### Questions:

- *The sources in step 1 introduce the sin of eating the forbidden fruit. The sources in step 2 introduce the sin of the flood. Do you think it is inevitable that human beings will sin? What can we do to stop it from happening?*
- *Is it bad or good that God created us with a strong evil inclination? On what might it depend?*

**STEP 3: How do we fight against the *yetzer hara*? Read the following and ask whether or not they help prepare us to take a stand. Each source suggests at least one strategy for fighting the *yetzer hara*.**

### 1) Berachot 61a

R. Nachman the son of R. Chisda expounded: Why is it written 'And Hashem Elohim formed mankind' with two *yods*? [Because] the Holy One created two inclinations in him, one good inclination and one evil inclination. R. Nachman the son of R. Yitzchak attacked this saying: If so, an animal -- where "and He formed" is written with only one *yod* -- must not have an [evil] inclination, yet don't we see animals that cause willful damage, bite and kick? Rather, [the explanation is like the opinion of] R. Shimon b. Pazi, who says: "Woe

is me from my maker {*yotzri*} [if I sin] and woe is me from my inclination {*yitzri*} [if I don't sin].

## 2) Sukka 52a

In the future, the Holy One, Blessed Be He, will bring the evil inclination and slaughter it before the righteous and before the wicked. The righteous -- it will seem to them like a high mountain. The wicked - it will seem to them like a single hair. These will cry and those will cry. The righteous will cry and say "How were we ever able to conquer this huge mountain" and the wicked will cry and say "How were we not able to conquer this little hair? and even the Holy One will be amazed with them...Said R. Assi - at first, the evil inclination appears like a weaver's thread (*i.e. very thin*) and in the end it seems like a cart rope (*i.e. very thick*)...

## 3) Kiddushin 30b

So says the Holy One, Blessed be He, says to Israel: "I have created the evil inclination and I have created the Torah as an antidote. If you busy yourselves with Torah, you will not be given into its power as it says "If you will do well, you will be lifted up", and if you do not busy yourselves with Torah, you will be given into its power, as it says: "at the doorway crouches sin" and not only that, but all of its business will be with you, as it says "to you will be its desire" but if you want, you will rule it, as it says "and you may rule it."

## 4) Shabbat 105b

R. Shimon ben Elazar said in the name of Chilfa bar Igra, who said in the name of R. Yochanan ben Nuri: One who tears his clothes in anger, or breaks something in anger, or who wastes his money in anger - it should be in your eyes like he is one who worships idols; for this is the artistry of the evil inclination, today he tells you 'do this' and tomorrow he says 'do that' until he tells you to worship idols and you go and worship them. Said R. Avin what is read "You shall not have a strange gods within you and do not bow down to a foreign God", which is a strange God that is within the body of a man - say this is the evil inclination.

## 5) Maimonides, Laws of Repentance 3:3

...a person should view themselves the whole year round as if they were 50% worthy and 50% guilty. And [they should view] the whole world as 50% worthy and 50% guilty. If he commits one sin he could tilt himself and the whole world to the side of guilt and cause destruction. If he performs one mitzva he could tilt himself and the whole world to the side of worthiness and cause salvation and succor as it says "the righteous one is the foundation of the world, i.e. the one who does *tzedek* tilts the whole world to worthiness and saves it.

**STEP 4: Final thoughts: it may be impossible for a person to always choose good over evil and always follow their good inclination. But every day is a new day and every decision is another opportunity. In this next source, the gemara suggests that when we make good decisions, such as honoring Shabbat, even “bad angels” bless us to keep doing more *mitzvot*.**

### **Shabbat 119b**

אמר מר עוקבא כל המתפלל בערב שבת ואומר ויכולו שני מלאכי השרת המלוין לו לאדם מניחין ידיהן על ראשו ואומרים לו וסר עונך וחטאתך תכפר תניא רבי יוסי בר יהודה אומר שני מלאכי השרת מלוין לו לאדם בערב שבת מבית הכנסת לביתו אחד טוב ואחד רע וכשבא לביתו ומצא נר דלוק ושלחן ערוך ומטתו מוצעת מלאך טוב אומר יהי רצון שתהא לשבת אחרת כך ומלאך רע עונה אמן בעל כרחו ואם לאו מלאך רע אומר יהי רצון שתהא לשבת אחרת כך ומלאך טוב עונה אמן בעל כרחו

*Said Mar Ukva: Anyone who prays Friday night and says “va-yechulu” the two ministering angels who accompany each person place their hands on his head and say “Let your sins and transgressions depart!” It was taught in a Baraita: Rabbi Yosi the son of Rav Yehuda said: two ministering angels accompany a person home from shul on Friday night – one good and one evil. When they come to his house and find a lit candle, a set table and a ready couch, the good angel says “May it be His will that it be like this next Shabbat.” And the bad angel answers Amen against his will. And if not, the bad angel says: “May it be His will that it be like this next Shabbat.” And the good angel answers Amen against his will.*

Navigator: Rambam says that these two angels ARE the good and evil inclinations inside of us. In addition, as the following final source suggests, our good inclination is always getting stronger as we get older and more mature. By doing good actions and becoming wiser, we can build up spiritual momentum for the good.

### **Maimonides – Guide for the Perplexed - Book 3, chapter 22 (Friedlander)**

The theory of the good and evil inclinations is frequently referred to in our religion. Our Sages also say: “serve God with your good and your evil intentions.” (*Berachot 57a*) They also say that our evil inclination we receive at our birth; for at the door sin croucheth” (*Gen 4:7*) as is distinctly said in the Law, “and the imagination (ed. yetzer) of the heart of man is evil from his youth” (*Gen 8:21*) The good inclination, however, comes when the mind is developed. . . it is to the good and the evil inclinations that they refer in their well-known words, “Every person is accompanied by two angels, one being on his right side, one on his left.: In the Babylonian Gemara (*Shabbat 119b*) they say distinctly of the two angels that one is good and one bad.

#### ***Navigator’s Final questions:***

- ***What techniques do you have for defeating your yetzer ha-ra?***
- ***What new techniques would you like to develop?***