

Emor: Fear of Death and Love of Life

- Nisson Shulman.

The Talmud's suggested weapons against the Yetzer Hara include Torah study, Shema, and contemplating the day of death, in that order. If the day of death is so effective, why wait to use it as a last resort? Love of Torah and Reverence for Hashem should be employed before fear of consequences.

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The Talmud warns us to be on the alert against the allurements and temptations of the yetzer hara, the evil inclination in every man's heart. Im nitzchono mutav, if one is able to overcome it in a normal manner, it is good. If not, let him study Torah. If that too does not help, let him recite the Shema. If even this is to no avail, let him consider the day of death (Berakhot 5a).

These are three weapons with which to fight the Yetzer Hara: study of Torah, the Shema, and contemplation of the end of life.

The question people usually ask about this text is: "If remembering the day of death is the most effective means of checking the evil inclination, why do the sages first advise the two admittedly less effective remedies? At the slightest provocation of the yetzer hara, one ought to consider the latter end of man, and thus make sure of a complete and immediate victory over temptation!"

There is a simple and logical explanation for the Talmud, and why it required the sequence of first Torah, then Shema, then finally the contemplation of the end of life. It is a sorry state when we have to employ fear or suffering and death as a deterrent from wrong.

We have heard the term "Foxhole Religion". When people are in danger, when they are facing death, they become more pious, more religious. It is religion based on desperation.

The strength of Judaism through the ages has been Torah learning and the Shema which represents an emotional bond between man and God. Knowledge and love of God and the faith of Israel have fortified the Jewish people with powerful armour against enemy onslaughts. Remembering death is a weapon of fear, and should be used as a last resort - when all other efforts prove ineffective

It is particularly important that the rule be applied in the training of our youth. More than one trefah sandwich and Sabbath desecration can be traced directly to a parent's undue severity with their children. Instead of inspiring them with reverence and love for all things Jewish and creating an atmosphere of beauty and holiness in the home, many a dictatorial parent has sought to achieve compliance by ruling with an iron fist. Such discipline has often driven children from the traditions of their forebears. Because fear and punishment were overemphasized, the children resented it and became rebellious. Knowledge and love could have saved them for the cause of traditional Judaism and service to our people.

The sidra drives this thought home strikingly when it declares, le'nefesh lo yitama beamav (Lev. 21:1). The priest who was to minister to his people was ordered to stand apart from the dead. He must remove himself from the unwholesome prompting engendered by thoughts of death. Not missah, but devotion to Torah and the Shema will assure the good, the noble and the worthwhile life.

(Submitted by Nisson Shulman)