

Shabbat Shuva: Dynamics of Yetzer Tov and Ra

- Nisson Shulman.

Shmuel David Luzatto's idea that we are always facing the yetzer hara one battle at a time

SHABBAT SHUVA

THE DYNAMICS OF YETZER TOV AND YETZER HARA

[A similar idea in longer form can be found in the Rosh Hashanah sermon under the title "Frontiers" and was based on a concept presented by the Hafetz Hayyim concerning prayer towards the Bet Hamikdash. (Ed.)]

Halakhah operates with relative concepts. Relativity is found in Jewish law in many ways. One of them is in the concept of time: shaot zemaniyot. Another is in the relative culpability for sin, such as the difference between shogeg and mezid, and the fact that G-d takes into account the conditions that tempt us and the weaknesses to which human nature is prone, when judging us at a season like this.

Which makes Teshuva a relative mitzvah as well. The Ponevezher Rav once pointed out that you can't say for a tzaddik or sage that his Teshuva should be for the same sins as those committed by an ordinary man. For his temptation is different. Thus, instead of theft which offers no temptation to him, he might sometimes be tempted to engage in a little genevat daat... Instead of immorality, which does not pose a challenge for him, he might be challenged to seek, - a little kavod ... For each person has his own frontier of het; each of us has his own temptation unique to ourselves.

This concept was made even clearer by Rabbi Samuel David Luzatto, the great ethical philosopher of our people and author of Mesilat Yesharim, "The Path of the Righteous". He wrote that every man has a personal frontier of Judaism. His crisis of faith lies in the observance of only one particular commandment that at the moment is on that frontier of Judaism. On that frontier, and in connection with only that Mitzvah, is he fighting his yetzer hara.

Supposing, for instance, a man has just eaten meat, but craves a cup of coffee. But he is a creature of habit, and he can't have coffee without milk. And he wonders whether to succumb to temptation, and just this once have milk with his coffee just after meat.

Now should he give in, after a while this violation becomes routine for him, and that habit, once formed, is no longer a crisis with him. The yetzer hara, the powers of temptation, have taken over that territory. The next crisis for him might be non-kosher meat! Finally, it might be pork. Thus he slips a little at a time.

Supposing, on the other hand, he conquers his inclination and refuses to have that cup of coffee. He is then on the way to form a habit of a higher standard of Kashrut, to form a new frontier, closer to observance. The next frontier might be for him the donning of tefilin at shahait, or Shabbat observances, or higher ethical practices in his business. So the yetzer hatov has won a bit more ground. "We are," said Luzatto, "constantly fighting on the frontier of our inclination, of

our yetzer. And the yetzer tov and yetzer hara are in a constant struggle over only one mitzvah, whichever happens to be on the individual's frontier of observance. These frontiers are constantly moving. It is our task to make them move up to a higher standard of observance; to make sure that the yetzer tov wins, and not the other way around."

This is a time of teshuva for all Jews. Each of us has his or her particular weaknesses, and it is in a time like this that we are to turn our weaknesses into strengths; that is the meaning of hazedonot naasu lo kishhegagot.