

Then Lavan spoke up and said to Yaakov... “The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children...And all that you see is mine.” (31:43)

With an arrogance that is simultaneously astounding and becoming, Lavan lashes into Yaakov *Avinu* with a diatribe, asserting himself to be the victim and Yaakov to be the aggressor. We are accustomed to it. Throughout the generations, we have contributed to the success of our host nations and, at the end of the day, not only did we not receive our due, but we were also blamed for attempting to undermine them.

In *Maamar Yechezkel*, authored by *Horav Yechezkel, zl, m’Kuzmir*, he cites his father, *Horav Tzvi Hirsch, zl*, who explains the word *roeh* (*v’chol asher atah roeh*, “All that you see”) as denoting a positive outlook, similar to *Roeh ani es divrei admon*, “The words of *Admon* appear correct to me” (*Kesubos* 108b). The meaning of this *pasuk* is: “All that you see/appears good in your eyes, is mine.” A person performs *mitzvos*, carries out acts of lovingkindness, and he is pleased with himself – i.e. he feels he did a splendid job, acted in a manner that will please Hashem; but, ultimately, he allows the *mitzvah* performance to play into his ego, thereby diminishing the spiritual commitment for the sake of Hashem. No longer is the *mitzvah* completely *l’shem Shomayim*, for the sake of Heaven, but, instead, it is self-aggrandizing. Such a *mitzvah* is *li hu*, it is mine, it belongs to the *yetzer hora*, evil inclination. The *yetzer hora* has just stolen the *mitzvah* from us. What had begun as a wonderful spiritual endeavor fell into the trap of ego which was set by the *yetzer hora*. The evil inclination says, “You did not serve Hashem. Your *frumkeit* is mine, because you belong to me.”

How often do we fall victim to this *yetzer hora*? We become involved in a project, an endeavor, an organization for which we think – or at least we have convinced ourselves to believe – that we are acting *l’shem Shomayim*, for the sake of Heaven, when, in fact, we are doing this for personal aggrandizement or to assuage our guilt. As such, we play right into the hands of the *yetzer hora*. Although it is true that the people whom we seek to help will definitely receive the benefits of our efforts, we wonder whether we will receive the merit that we think we deserve. When we “arrive” at our final destination and expect to employ all the merits which we assume that we have earned, the *yetzer hora* will greet us with, *V’chol asher atah roeh – sheli hu*, “It is all mine,” because our motives have lacked complete sincerity.

Horav Baruch Ber Leibowitz, zl, the legendary *Rosh Yeshivah* of Kamenitz, related the following story. He prefaced his words with a question (quoted by *Horav Mordechai Schwab, zl*, in *Maamer Mordechai*), “How is it possible for the *yetzer hora* to enter into the mind of the *Rosh Yeshivah* to tell him not to learn, to instruct him, ‘Do not fear Hashem’? Impossible. It simply is not possible for the *yetzer hora* to have such a hold. True. Nonetheless, the *yetzer hora* does affect everyone. The answer is: With *frumkeit*.” The *yetzer hora* drives a wedge between the person and his motivation to do the right thing, to be observant, righteous, virtuous. By convincing a person that he has failed,

that his religious observance is lacking, missing its mark, the *yetzer hora* succeeds in depressing a person, causing him to question himself, his learning, his *mitzvah* observance.

Rav Baruch Ber gave a first person account about how this form of guile affected him. Following World War I, the *Rosh Yeshivah* was in Vilna. It was there that his father, *Horav Shmuel David, zl*, became ill. Due to his meticulous adherence to the *mitzvah* of *Kibbud av*, honoring his father, Rav Baruch Ber did not leave his father's bedside all night. He refused to allow anyone – not even a family member – to take his place. It was his responsibility, and he would not shirk his responsibility. Indeed, it reached the point that it was affecting the health of the *Rosh Yeshivah*. One night, the family was finally able to convince him to take a break. They asked one of his older students from the *yeshivah* to sit with the *Rosh Yeshivah's* father. That was the night that Rav Shmuel David returned his saintly soul to his Creator.

Rav Baruch Ber was beside himself, blaming his father's passing on his personal deficiency in observing the *mitzvah* of *Kibbud av*. He fell into a deep melancholy, to the point that he felt he could not say *shiur*, render his daily Torah lecture. [The *Rosh Yeshivah's* depression was rooted in the perceived notion that he failed to execute a *mitzvah* properly.] At that point, the *Chafetz Chaim, zl* (who had somehow heard of Rav Baruch Ber's situation), sent a message asking Rav Baruch Ber to come visit him. When the *Chafetz Chaim* called, one immediately responded. Rav Baruch Ber left for Radin. When he arrived, the *Chafetz Chaim* greeted him and went right to the point. The *Chafetz Chaim* held Rav Baruch Ber's hand for half an hour, during which he explained to him the essence of *teshuvah*, repentance/ return. He repeated a number of times that *teshuvah* does not simply atone for one's sin; it is much more powerful than that. *Teshuvah* transforms the penitent into a totally new person – who had never sinned! The *Chafetz Chaim* sufficiently reiterated this idea until Rav Baruch Ber accepted it.

Rav Baruch Ber taught a powerful lesson. The *yetzer hora* can enter into the mind of an unsuspecting soul, such as a *ben Torah*, who otherwise would never encounter this abomination. The tactics must change. Rather than enticing a person to sin, the *yetzer hora* convinces a person that his *frumkeit*, religious observance, is lacking, that he failed to execute a *mitzvah* properly. Such feelings of guilt can gnaw at a serious minded person whose love for Hashem is so absolute that anything which impugns the integrity of his observance will immediately dishearten him.

Having said this, we must ask ourselves: As observant Jews who, for the most part, will not allow the *yetzer hora* to manipulate us to overt transgression, are we certain that it cannot contravene our *mitzvos*? To distance oneself from sin is obvious, but to avoid partnering with the *yetzer hora* in our *mitzvah* performance is perhaps not as conclusive.