

For seven days, leaven may not be found in your houses. (12:19)

Preparing for *Pesach* is a daunting task – one made increasingly more difficult with the stipulation that not even the smallest crumb of leaven may be in one's possession. It goes without saying that this measure is prohibited for human consumption. At first glance, this law is strange. Indeed, the laws concerning *chametz* are unique in comparison with other *maachalos asuros*, prohibited foods. The *halachah* of *mashehu*, whereby even the slightest measure of *chametz* is prohibited, and, if it mingles with other food, the entire unit is prohibited, is different from other prohibited foods in which *bitul*, nullification, applies. Even *chazir*, pork, is *bateil b'shishim*, nullified in sixty times its volume, but *chametz* is never nullified. One must eradicate every single trace of *chametz*. Why? Why is such great significance placed on destroying the tiniest bit of *chametz*?

Horav Nissim Yagen, zl, explains that *stam maachalos asuros*, the average forbidden food, is *baateil b'shishim*, since in the proportion of sixty times itself, its taste is no longer detectable. Nonetheless, even if a forbidden food can no longer be detected – it is still there. While this does not bother us concerning pork, or whatever (since it is all about the taste), it does bother us concerning *chametz*. *Chametz* symbolizes the *yetzer hora*, evil-inclination. (Yeast makes the dough rise, just as the *yetzer hora* arrogates a person, with arrogance being the root of most sinful behavior). When it comes to the *yetzer hora* there is no room for compromise. Thus, as we cannot make any compromises with the *yetzer hora*, we can neither allow a trace of *chametz* in our possession, nor may we ingest it, regardless of how many times it has been nullified.

One tiny germ left unchecked can destroy an entire city. The *yetzer hora* can – and has – destroyed individuals who have achieved acclaim and distinction. One trace of self-delusion leads to self-seduction, and goes on from there to complete capitulation and downfall. Once the *yetzer hora* grabs a hold of a person he is in a free-fall to infamy, unaware that it is occurring.

The *yetzer hora* does not begin by attempting to convince a person to commit an *aveirah*, sin. It starts with a *mitzvah* – perform the *mitzvah*, but take something out of it for yourself: a little attention, a little *kavod*, honor, a little pleasure; anything that defrays from the actual *mitzvah* its values, its purpose. Once the *yetzer hora* succeeds in diminishing the *mitzvah*, it moves on to *aveiros*. The individual is now trapped. It is much more difficult to extricate oneself once the *aveiros* have begun.

Veritably, the term evil inclination is pejorative. Despite the translation of its name, the *yetzer hora* is not an impulse to do evil, to do harm. The *yetzer* inclination is an inner drive, which, if used properly, is necessary – even vital – for human life. *Chazal* (*Bereishis Rabbah* 9) teach, “If not for the *yetzer hora*, no one would build a house, marry, beget children, nor engage in commerce.” The struggle begins when we attempt to apply these impulses which, for the most part, arise from our lower base selves to accommodate our higher selves, to address our spiritual mission. The *yetzer*

hora will do everything within its power to impugn and subvert our efforts, so that we do not succeed. In other words, the impulse is not evil; rather, it is difficult to control its use for our higher, loftier mission in life.

The *Alter, zl, m'Novoradok* posits that the *yetzer hora* finds or creates an opening, usually based on *frumkeit*, righteousness. He then exploits that and, slowly, before we know it, we have committed a sin. This is what happened with Kayin, who became jealous when his brother, Hevel, offered a sacrifice. When Kayin saw that Hashem accepted Hevel's sacrifice, he, too, wanted his sacrifice to be accepted. It began with religious envy (I want to be as great a scholar as my neighbor), but, after all is said and done, it was pure jealousy. The *yetzer hora* kicked in, transferring the religious envy into murderous envy and, finally murder.

One should never underestimate this adversary. This is why even a *mashehu*, the smallest amount of *chametz*, is unacceptable on *Pesach*.

We think that the illustrious Torah giants have it easy. After all, they seem to have conquered their impulse. The *talmidim*, students, of the *Gaon, zl, m'Vilna*, once said to him, "*Rebbe*, if only we could have your *yetzer hora*." The *Gaon* quickly replied, "That is the last thing that you want. The *yetzer hora* grows as the person progresses spiritually. Commensurate with his spiritual ascendancy will be the power of his *yetzer hora*."

Horav Pinchas Koritzer, zl, entered the *bais hamedrash* and noticed his students conversing with one another. As he came over, they immediately concluded the conversation. He asked them what they had been talking about. They said, "We are afraid that the *yetzer hora* is bearing down on us. We are discussing ways to escape his pursuit." The *Rebbe* responded, "You have no need to worry. You are not on such an elevated spiritual level that the *yetzer hora* chases after you. You are still pursuing him!"

The *yetzer hora* takes his function very seriously.

Horav Nossan Breslover, zl, once commented, "The evil inclination cares less about the sin which man commits than about the *atzvus*, depression, that results from it." The *yetzer hora* can now further ensnare the person and cause him to perform more and greater sins. We, thus, become our own biggest enemy. When one's heart is in pain, he cannot properly serve Hashem. This is what the *yetzer hora* wants. As long as we are doing a poor job of serving Hashem, encouraging us to sin is not necessary. Only one thing is worse than committing a sin: compounding one's infraction by not repenting. This is where the depression does the most damage, by convincing the sinner that he cannot correct the spiritual detriment that he created. The sinner figures, since I cannot change what I have done, I might as well continue along the road to infamy. This is the *yetzer hora* speaking to us.

He attempts to seal the deal by convincing us that, once he has sinned, he cannot extricate

himself. He is on a trajectory towards ignominy. Why fight it if winning is not a viable option? Under such circumstances, one might as well join the opposition. If one pauses long enough to gather his senses and think what is happening, he realizes his foolishness. All of this is orchestrated by the *yetzer hora*, who does nothing but allow us to make poor choices, and then encourages us to adhere to our decision because, after all, it is all over for us anyway. The *yetzer hora* is not evil. We are evil. We make the wrong choices. The *yetzer hora* simply sees to it that we stick with those decisions.