

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [287]

People Searched for a One-Day-Old Fresh Egg for the Sick but Could Not Find One (Insights into Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 64a)



Background to Our Story

Yetzer Hara – The Evil Inclination



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yetzer_hara

In [Judaism](#), *yetzer hara* (Hebrew: יצר הרע *yēṣer hara'*) is the congenital inclination to do [evil](#), by violating the will of God. The term is drawn from the phrase "the imagination of the heart of man [is] evil", which occurs twice in the Hebrew Bible, at [Genesis](#) 6:5 and 8:21.

In traditional Judaism, the *yetzer hara* is not a demonic force, but rather man's misuse of things the physical body needs to survive. Thus, the need for food becomes gluttony due to the *yetzer hara*. The need for procreation becomes sexual abuse, and so on.

According to the Talmudic tractate [Avot de-Rabbi Natan](#), a boy's evil inclination is greater than his good inclination until he turns 13 ([bar mitzvah](#)), at which point the good inclination is "born" and able to control his behavior. Moreover, the rabbis have stated: "The greater the man, the greater his [evil] inclination."

? What do the Sages mean by "The greater the man, the greater his [evil] inclination"?

Parasang [parsa]



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Pesachim Part 2. Koren publishers Jerusalem
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Parasang [parsa] This word appears relatively early on in Iranian languages, and was borrowed into Greek. This Persian unit of measurement equals four *mil*, or approximately 5 km. Four hundred parasangs are equivalent to 2,000 km

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 64a

תָּא שְׁמַע: "וַיִּזְעַקוּ בְּקוֹל גָּדוֹל אֶל ה' אֱלֹהֵיהֶם". מַאי אָמור? אָמַר רַב יְהוּדָה וְאִיתִימָא רַב יוֹנָתָן: בְּיַד בְּיָא! הֵינּוּ דְאַחַר רַבִּי לְבֵיתָא, וְקָלִיא לְהִיכְלָא, וְקָטְלִינְהוּ לְצַדִּיקִי, וְאַגְלִינְהוּ לְיִשְׂרָאֵל מְאַרְעִיָּהוּ, וְעַדִּינְהוּ הוּא מְרַקַּד בֵּינָן. כְּלוּם יְהַבְתִּיהָ לָן אֶלָּא לְקַבּוּלֵי בֵּיהּ אֲגָרָא? לָא אִיהוּ בְּעֵינָן וְלָא אֲגָרִיָּה בְּעֵינָן!

יָתְבוּ תַלְתָּא יוֹמָא בְּתַעֲנִיתָא, בְּעוּ רַחֲמֵי. נָפַל לְהוּ פִּיתְקָא מְרַקִּיעָא, דְהָוָה כְּתִיב בָּהּ "אָמַת". אָמַר רַבִּי חֲנִינָא: שְׁמַע מִיָּנָה: חוֹתְמוֹ שֶׁל הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא "אָמַת".

נָפַק כְּגוֹרְיָא דְנוּרָא מִבֵּית קָדְשֵׁי הַקְּדוֹשִׁים. אָמַר לְהוּ נְבִיא לְיִשְׂרָאֵל: "הֵינּוּ יִצְרָא דְעַבּוּדָה זָרָה". בְּהַדִּי דְקַתְפְּסִי לֵיהּ, אִישְׁתַּמֵּיט בִּינִיתָא מִיָּנָה, וְאֶזְל קָלִיָּה בְּאַרְבַּע מָאָה פְּרָסִי. אָמְרוּ: "הֵיכִי נִיעֲבֵד? דִּילְמָא מְשַׁמֵּיט מְרַחֲמֵי עֲלֵיהּ?" אָמַר לְהוּ נְבִיא: "שְׂדֵיֵהוּ בְּדוּדָא דְאַבְרָא, וְכַסְיוּהּ בְּאַבְרָא, דְשִׁיחַ קָלִיָּה. דְכְּתִיב: "וַיֹּאמֶר זֹאת הִרְשָׁעָה וַיִּשְׁלַח אוֹתָהּ אֶל תּוֹךְ הָאִיפָה וַיִּשְׁלַח אֶת הָאֶבֶן הַעוֹפֶרֶת אֶל פִּיהָ".

אָמְרִי: "הוֹאִיל וְעַתָּה רָצוֹן הוּא נִיבְעֵי רַחֲמֵי אִיצְרָא דְעַבְרָה". בְּעוּ רַחֲמֵי, אִימְסַר בִּידֵיֵהוּ.

חֲבָשׁוּהוּ תַלְתָּא יוֹמֵי. אִיבְעוּ בִיעֲתָא בֵּת יוֹמָא לְחוּלָה, וְלָא אֲשַׁכְּחוּ. אָמְרוּ: "הֵיכִי נִיעֲבִיד? נִיבְעֵי פְלָגָא, פְּלָגָא מְרַקִּיעָא לָא יְהָבִי". כְּחִלְיָנְהוּ לְעֵינָיָהּ. אֲהָנִי בֵּיהּ דְלָא אִיגְרִי אִיגִישׁ בְּקְרוּבַתִּיהָ.

Rav Yehuda says, and some say it is Rav Yonatan who says: Woe, woe [*baya, baya*], this evil inclination for idol worship is what destroyed the Temple, and burned the Sanctuary, and murdered the righteous ones, and caused the Jewish people to be exiled from their land. And it still dances among us, i.e., it still affects us. Didn't You give it to us solely for the purpose of our receiving reward for overcoming it? We do not want it, nor do we not want its reward!

The people fasted for three days and prayed for mercy. In response to their prayer a note fell for them from the heavens in which was written: Truth, indicating that God accepted their request. The Gemara makes a parenthetical observation. Rabbi Ḥanina says: Conclude from it that the seal of the Holy One, Blessed be He, is truth.

The form of a fiery lion cub came forth from the chamber of the Holy of Holies. Zechariah, the prophet, said to the Jewish people: This is the evil

inclination for idol worship. When they caught hold of it one of its hairs fell out, and it let out a shriek of pain that was heard for four hundred parasangs [parsei]. They said: What should we do to get rid of the evil inclination? Perhaps Heaven will have mercy upon it if we attempt to kill it, as it will certainly scream even more.

The prophet said to them: Throw it into a container made of lead and cover it with lead, as lead absorbs sound. As it is written: "And he said: This is the evil one. And he cast it down into the midst of the measure, and he cast a stone of lead upon its opening" (Zechariah 5:8). They followed this advice and were freed of the evil inclination for idol worship.

When they saw that the evil inclination for idol worship was delivered into their hands as they requested, the Sages said: Since it is an auspicious time, let us pray for mercy concerning the evil inclination for sin concerning sexual matters. They prayed for mercy, and it was also delivered into their hands.

[The Sages] imprisoned it for three days. At that time, people searched for a one-day-old fresh egg for the sick but could not find one. Since the inclination to reproduce was quashed, the chickens stopped laying eggs. They said: What should we do? If we pray for half, i.e., that only half its power be annulled, nothing will be achieved, because Heaven does not grant half gifts, only whole gifts.

What did they do? They gouged out its eyes, and this was effective in limiting it to the extent that a person is no longer aroused to commit incest with his close relatives.



Explaining the Story - What is going on in our story? (Explain the sequence of events)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why do the Sages want to get rid of the evil inclination for idol worship?

? What do the Sages mean by the expression “We do not want it, nor do we not want its reward!”

? How did the evil inclination look?

Extra Bonus ? Why do you think the evil inclination for idol worship was in the Holy of Holies?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? Why were the Sages apprehensive about killing the evil inclination for idol worship?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

? How do we know that the Sages were successful in getting rid of the evil inclination for idol worship?

? Why did the Sages, after they got rid of the evil inclination for idol worship, ask God to free them from the evil inclination for sin?

Bonus ? Why did the chickens stop laying eggs?

Bonus ? Why did the Sages let the evil inclination for sin out, albeit with its eyes gauged?

? How do we know that the Sages were successful in keeping the evil inclination for sin in check to the extent that a person is no longer aroused to commit incest with his close relatives?

Bonus ? What do you think is the symbolism of gauging the eyes of the inclination for sin?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

“The Twist” – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from These Texts

! Be careful what you wish for...

epilogue