YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**Rav Yishai Jeselsohn**

**PARASHAT VAYETZE**

**The Struggle with the Evil Inclination**

**I. Introduction: “And Yaakov went out from Be’er Sheva”**

It is well known that the Torah can be interpreted on four levels: *peshat*,the surface or literal meaning; *remez*, referring to hints or deep meaning; *derash*, the midrashic meaning; and *sod*, the secret or esoteric, mystical meaning. It is customary to understand "*remez*" as referring to techniques like *gematriot*, the substitution of numbers for letters of the Hebrew alphabet, but in reality, *remez* refers to anything hinted to a person from the Torah. Rav Dessler described it well:

*Remez* – Everybody finds in the Torah an allusion to his own truth, the world of his personal spiritual powers. This is what they meant when they said that the name of every individual, that is to say, his inner content, is alluded to in the Torah. (*Mikhtav mei-Eliyahu*, 5, p. 216)

The *remez* that we will study in this *shiur* presents the entire story of Yaakov's ladder as a parable for the struggle with the evil inclination. Through examining this *remez*, we will see the *Or Ha-Chaim*’s various suggestions regarding howto deal with the evil inclination, a struggle that each and every person experiences as an inherent part of his life.

In the *Zohar* (*Bereishit* 148, 2), the verse "And Yaakov went out from Be’er Sheva, and went toward Charan" (*Bereishit* 28:10) is interpreted, through *remez*, as dealing with the departure of the people of Israel into exile after the destruction of the Temple. We can easily understand relating to Yaakov as the representative of the people of Israel: they are named after him, and he is the patriarch whose descendants began their status as a nation.

The *Or Ha-Chaim*, however,takes this idea in a more individualized direction. Based on another passage in the *Zohar* (147), he sees Yaakov's departure as alluding to each soul’s departure from the upper worlds from which it was quarried to the physical world in which we live.

The soul is described as "Yaakov," according to the *Or Ha-Chaim*, because the evil inclination follows [*okev*] after it. Just as our father Yaakov held the heel of his brother Esav, so the evil inclination holds the heel of the soul and tries to prevent it from moving forward:

"And Yaakov went out" – This is the soul as it goes out from the upper world, and it is called "Yaakov" because of the evil inclination that is wrapped around his heels [*akeivav*]. (*Or Ha-Chaim* 28:14)

Our lives in this world include, on the one hand, a Divine soul quarried from a higher source, and on the other hand, the evil inclination that holds fast to it. This is already described earlier in the Torah:

For the inclination of man's heart is evil from his youth. (*Bereishit* 8:21)

A similar idea (including use of this verse) appears in the Midrash with regard to the relationship between the good inclination and the evil inclination. Two debates between Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Nasi and Antoninos, in both of which Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Nasi ultimately concedes to Antoninos, relate to the formation of the good inclination and the evil inclination:

Antoninos asked our Rabbi [Yehuda Ha-Nasi], saying to him: "From when is the **evil inclination** implanted in a person? From the moment he emerges from his mother's womb, or even before he emerges from his mother's womb?" He said to him: "Even before he emerges from his mother's womb." He said to him: "No. If it were implanted in him while still in his mother's womb, he [the fetus] would dig through her innards and emerge [by force]." Rabbi [Yehuda Ha-Nasi] conceded to him, for he equated his opinion with the opinion of the Biblical verse: "For the inclination of man's heart is evil from his youth [*mi-ne'urav*]. Rabbi Yudan said: It is written: "*mi-ne'arav*"; from the moment that he bestirs [*nin'ar*] himself to emerge from his mother's womb.

Antoninos also asked our Rabbi [Yehuda Ha-Nasi], saying to him: "From when is a **soul** embedded in a person? From the moment he emerges from his mother's womb, or even before he emerges from his mother's womb?" He said to him: "From the moment he emerges from his mother's womb." He said to him: "No. This may be likened to a piece of meat: if one were to leave it without salting it for three days, it putrefies [and so too a fetus would rot without the spirit of life]." Rabbi [Yehuda Ha-Nasi] conceded to him, for he equated his opinion with the opinion of the Biblical verse, as it is stated: "You have granted me life and kindness, and Your command [*u-fekudatekha*] has preserved my spirit" (*Iyov* 10:12) – from when did You place the soul in me? From when You deposited me [*hifkadetani*]. (*Bereishit Rabba* 34:10; and similarly *Sanhedrin* 91b)

The conclusion from these two debates is that first the soul, which is essentially good, is created. Only when a person emerges into the world is the evil inclination, which follows on the soul’s heels, implanted in him. The imagery of the evil inclination hanging onto the soul’s heels does not merely symbolize the fact that they are intertwined, but also alludes to the desire of the evil inclination to hinder (*le-akev*) the soul and prevent it from achieving its purpose.

The *Or Ha-Chaim* also relates to the names of the places mentioned in the account of Yaakov's departure:

"From Be'er Sheva" (v.10) – the place from which the souls emerge is called "the Well [*be'er*]of Living Water, and *sheva* alludes to the oath [*shevu'a*] of God that the soul takes when it emerges, that it will not transgress a word of the Torah (see *Nidda* 30b).

And it says: "And he went to Charan," as they said (*Sanhedrin* 91b) that the evil inclination enters a person when he leaves his mother's womb, as it is written: "[Sin crouches] at the door" (*Bereishit* 4:7).[[1]](#footnote-1) (*Or Ha-Chaim* 28:14)

"Be'er Sheva" alludes to pregnancy – when the fetus is in its mother's womb. The Gemara in *Nidda*, in the course of the discussion referenced by the *Or Ha-Chaim*,describes this as a time when the fetus is completely connected to holiness:

A lamp burns above its head, and it looks and sees from one end of the world to the other… And there is no time in which a person is immersed in good more than those days… It is also taught all the Torah from beginning to end…. (*Nidda* 30b)

Things change abruptly when the fetus exits this ideal, worry-free world:

As soon as [the fetus] emerges into the air of the world, an angel arrives, slaps it on its mouth, and causes it to forget all the Torah completely, as it is stated: "Sin crouches at the door." (Ibid.)

The verse “sin crouches at the door,” which here describes the forgetting of Torah, appears in *Sanhedrin* 91b (in the parallel passage to *Bereishit Rabba* 34:10) as the proof Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Nasi finds to support Antoninos’s claim that the evil inclination enters a person at the time of his birth. It seems that the two issues are connected: As long as the fetus is in its mother's womb, it is completely dependent on God, and in such a reality, there is no room at all for the evil inclination.[[2]](#footnote-2) Only after forgetting the Torah and entering into this world – where a person can choose for himself, where he is dependent upon himself, and where he does not see the *Shekhina* before him – only then can the evil inclination exist.

God, too, is aware of this process. Therefore, when the fetus leaves its mother's womb, its role and coming challenges are addressed explicitly via the oath mentioned by the *Or Ha-Chaim*:

It does not emerge from there until it is made to take an oath… What is the oath that it is made to take? Be righteous, and be not wicked, and even if the entire world tells you that you are righteous, be wicked in your own eyes. And know that God is pure and His servants are pure, and the soul that He gave you is pure; if you preserve it in purity, it is well, but if not, I will take it away from you. (*Nidda*, ibid.)

Thus, Yaakov goes out from "Be'er Sheva" – the source of his soul, where he takes that oath – to "Charan," the place of the evil inclination. These words also match the actual story of Yaakov, who leaves his mother's house, the place from which he was “quarried,” to go to an unknown land – while Esav is wrapped around his heel, seeking to kill him.

**II. First piece of advice: "And he chanced upon a certain place" – Prayer**

Already in *Parashat Bereishit*, where the Divine soul's emergence into the world of action, where sin and evil are found, is described – we are also told that it is possible for man to control his evil inclination:

If you do well, shall it not be lifted up? And if you do not well, *sin crouches at the door*; and to you is its desire, *but you may rule over it*. (*Bereishit* 4:7)

The *Or Ha-Chaim* on our *parasha* offers several strategies and pieces of advice for how we can actualize our God-given ability to rule over our evil inclinations. The first, alluded to in the description of Yaakov’s stop on the way to Charan, is prayer:

And it says: "And he chanced upon a certain place" (*Bereishit* 28:11) – for a person must pray to God, who is the *place* of the world, that He not abandon him in its hand [=the hand of the evil inclination]. (*Or Ha-Chaim* 28:14).

The Gemara (*Berakhot* 26b) understands this verse, describing Yaakov’s encounter with a particular place, as alluding to prayer. Specifically, it tells us that our father Yaakov instituted the evening prayer. The evening prayer is the prayer of faith: "And your faith at night" (*Tehillim* 92:3). When it is dark, and a person feels unsafe in his world, he should pray to God that even in difficult moments of darkness, He will not abandon him. On the simple level, that is Yaakov's prayer: He asks God to watch over him as he walks on a path full of fog and uncertainty. On the level of *remez*, the *Or Ha-Chaim* explains that prayeris appropriate for each and every individual with regard to his own evil inclination. In the womb of our mother, it was the closeness to God that kept us from sinning. A person who sets God before him at every moment is guaranteed not to sin, for how can one sin when one feels God, His fear and His love, in such a true and sincere way?!

Yaakov also prays the following morning, asking God to remain with him for his entire journey:

If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and clothing to wear; so that I come back to my father's house in peace, then shall the Lord be my God. (*Bereisht* 28:20)[[3]](#footnote-3)

Thus, our prayer to God against the evil inclination is the same prayer: "that he not abandon him in its hand"! That whenever the evil inclination urges us to commit any offense, God will be there before our eyes, so that we will be able to weigh the issues in a true and honest way.

The great advantage that the evil inclination enjoys in our world is our blindness. In this world of falseness [*alma de-shikra*], we feel our lusts, desires, and pleasures very strongly, but feel the *Shekhina* that is with us much less clearly. The *Or Ha-Chaim* tells us this is something for which we must pray.

**III. Second piece of advice: "And he spent the night there"**

And it says: "And he spent the night there, because the sun had set" (28:11) – One must conduct himself in this manner until his departure from this world, when his sun sets. This is what they said (*Avot* 2:4): "Trust not in yourself until the day of your death. (*Or Ha-Chaim* 28:14)

Another way that the evil inclination convinces us to commit transgressions is by force of habit. We view offenses that we have already committed as being less serious in nature, for we already committed them and nothing happened – as Rav Huna said:

Once a man has committed a sin once and twice, it is permitted to him. "Permitted"? How could that occur to you? Rather, it appears to him *as if* it were permitted. (*Yoma* 86b)

The more a person continues to commit transgressions, the more difficult it is for him to repent, and it begins to seem as though he has no hope for the future.

Rabbi Asi said: The evil inclination is at first like the thread of a spider, but in the end becomes like cart ropes, as it is stated: "Woe to them that draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as it were with a cart rope" (*Yeshayahu* 5:18). (*Sukka* 52a)

Nevertheless, our Sages in the Mishna (*Avot* 2:4) instruct us not to stop trying. Despair is the counsel of the evil inclination, and one of the ways it prevents us from fighting against it. Therefore, argues the *Or Ha-Chaim*, praying to God about the evil inclination is not a one-time event, but is necessary on a daily basis. We see this in the following Gemara:

Rav Yitzchak said: Man's evil inclination renews itself daily against him, as it is stated: "[Every imagination of the thoughts of his heart] was only evil every day" (*Bereishit* 6:5).

And Rabbi Shimon ben Levi said: Man's evil inclination gathers strength against him daily and seeks to slay him, as it is stated: "The wicked watches the righteous, and seeks to slay him" (*Tehillim* 37:32). If not for the Holy One, blessed be He, helping him [man], he would not be able to prevail against it, for it is stated: "The Lord will not abandon him in its hand" (ibid. v. 33). (*Kiddushin* 30b)

**IV. Third piece of advice: "And he took of the stones of the place" – Torah**

And it says: "And he took of the stones of the place" (28:11) – This is what they said (*Berakhot* 5a): "Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: One should always incite the good inclination [in his soul, to fight the evil inclination]… If not, let him study the Torah, for it is written: 'Commune with your own heart' (*Tehillim* 4:5)." This is what it means when it says: "Of the stones of the place" – the building blocks of the world, i.e., the words of the Torah.

This is what they said (*Sota* 21b): The Torah saves one from the evil inclination both when he is actively engaged in its study and when he is not actively engaged in its study. (*Or Ha-Chaim* 28:14)

The *Or Ha-Chaim* emphasizes the importance of Torah study as a tool in the war against the evil inclination. The same idea emerges earlier in the Gemara in *Kiddushin*:

So did the Holy One, blessed be He, say to Israel: "My children! I created the evil inclination, but I [also] created the Torah, with which to season it. If you occupy yourselves with the Torah, you will not be delivered into his [i.e., the evil inclination’s] hand, for it is stated: 'If you do well, shall you not be exalted?' But if you do not occupy yourselves with the Torah, you shall be delivered into his hand, for it is stated: 'Sin crouches at the door.' Moreover, all of his dealings are about you [to make you sin], for it is stated: 'And to you shall be his desire.' Yet if you wish, you can rule over him, for it is stated: 'And you shall rule over him.'" (*Kiddushin* 30b)

It seems that the Torah's role in the war against the evil inclination can be explained in several ways:

a. **To distinguish between good and evil.** Besides studying Torah, the *Or Ha-Chaim* offers another piece of advice here, following on Reish Lakish’s statement in *Berakhot* (5a): to incite the good inclination against the evil inclination. It is possible that they have one root. The *Tzelach* in *Berakhot* (5a) explains that the evil inclination sometimes tries to disguise itself as the good inclination and convince a person that committing a certain offense is for the good. That is why the person needs to distinguish between good and evil – to know where the line is between them. This knowledge is related to the study of which the *Or Ha-Chaim* speaks, but also to inciting the good inclination against the evil inclination, which Rashi explains as going out to war against it. When you go out to war, it is clear who is good and who is evil, whereas in times of peace, it is possible to make a mistake.

b. **Engaging in positive action.** The importance of Torah in the war against the evil inclination finds expression in an additional point. The Rambam writes at the end of *Hilkhot Issurei Bi'a*:

And [our Sages gave] even greater [advice], saying: A person should always turn himself and his thoughts to the words of the Torah and expand his knowledge in wisdom, for the thoughts of forbidden relations grow strong solely in a heart which is empty of wisdom. (*Hilkhot Issurei Bi'a* 22:21)

When a person engages in Torah study, he has no time to think about sins. He is busy and fulfilled by his positive actions and feels no need at all to engage in evil.

c. **The Torah's influence on man.** It seems that there may also be a third dimension, which is the Torah's influence on man. The Torah teaches man to be good; its study and the performance of its *mitzvot* straighten a person’s path in life – and thus, it protects a person even when he is not actively engaged in study. The Torah also knows how to direct the inclination towards good.

Rashi on the verse "with all your heart" (*Devarim* 6:5) says that one must serve God with both of his inclinations: his good inclination and his evil inclination. This implies that the intention is not to defeat the evil inclination and conquer it, but to utilize it for the purpose of God's service. Perhaps this is what the Gemara in *Kiddushin* had in mind when it saw the Torah as "seasoning" for the evil inclination. Spices take food that cannot be eaten and make it edible and tasty. So too, the Torah takes the evil inclination, which is really the power hidden in man, and directs it where it will have positive effects.

**V. Fourth piece of advice: "And he placed them under his head" – Reciting *Shema***

It says: "And he placed them under his head" (28:11). This is like what Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: If he does not subdue it, let him recite the *Shema* said before going to sleep, as it is stated: "Upon your bed" (*Tehillim* 4:5). (*Or Ha-Chaim* 28:14)

The *Or Ha-Chaim* continues here with the layered set of tools mentioned in the Gemara in *Berakhot* for fighting the evil inclination:

Rabbi Levi bar Chama said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish: One should always incite the good inclination [in his soul] to fight against the evil inclination, as it is stated: "Tremble and sin not" (*Tehillim* 4:5).

If he subdues it, well and good. If not, let him study the Torah, as it is stated: "Commune with your own heart" (ibid.).

If he subdues it, well and good. If not, let him recite the *Shema*, as it is stated: "Upon your bed" (ibid.).

If he subdues it, well and good. If not, let him remind himself of the day of death, as it is stated: "And be still, Sela" (ibid.). (*Berakhot* 5a)

By reciting the Shema, one accepts the yoke of the heavenly kingdom. In addition, the recitation of *Shema* before going to sleep in particular has a Torah dimension: "Commune with your own heart upon your bed."[[4]](#footnote-4) But this is Torah that a person not only engages in but is present in. Falling asleep with words of Torah symbolizes the idea that our whole life revolves around Torah. Even when we are not in control, during sleep, it is the Torah that we hope will fill our dreams and ideas. In fact, we are dealing here with a more foundational level of Torah.

**VI. Last Piece of advice: "And he lay down in that place to sleep" – The day of death**

And it says: "And he lay down in that place to sleep" (28:11) – This alludes to the final statement of Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel: If he does not subdue it, let him remind himself of the day of death. This is what is stated: "And he lay down [*va-yishkav*]," alluding to the lying down in the known place in the way of the world, the place for every living being.

After [meeting] all these conditions, one is guaranteed to overcome his evil inclination. (*Or Ha-Chaim* 28:14)

The Mishna in *Avot* teaches us that contemplating the day of death can help in the war against the evil inclination in two ways:

Akavia ben Mahalalel said: Contemplate three things and you will not come to the power of sin: Know from where you came, and to where you are going, and before whom you are destined to give an account and reckoning… And to where you are going – to a place of dust, of worm and of maggot…. (*Avot* 3:1)

Contemplating the day of death puts everything into proportion. The fact that we started as matter and will end as matter indicates the smallness and lowliness of man, the meaninglessness of material pleasures that come today and disappear tomorrow. At the same time, it highlights the superiority and importance of occupation with eternal spiritual life.

But that is not enough. There is another dimension in which the day of death helps to overcome the evil inclination:

Rabbi Eliezer says: … and repent one day before your death. (*Avot* 2:10)

The Rambam explains:

He does not know when he will die, and therefore all his days will be occupied with penance. (*Commentary to the Mishna*, ad loc.)

We can always push off the war with the evil inclination and say that we will begin it tomorrow. But when a person feels that tomorrow is the day of his death, he does not push off anything. The fact that our lives hang in the balance should make us consider every action in a much more significant way. A person whose end is near thinks carefully about what he still wants to do in life, what he has not yet accomplished, in what he should invest the time that he has left. If we had this consciousness, even in a small measure, we would consider our actions in a very different manner.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Editor’s note: The *Zohar* explains “he went to Charan” as an allusion to going over “to another domain (*reshu achara*)” – presumably, the negative realm associated with the evil inclination. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For an expanded discussion, see *Or Same'ach*, *Hilkhot Teshuva*, chapter 5, in his discussion of "*Ha-kol tzafui ve-ha-reshut netuna* (Everything is foreseen and [yet] permission is given)," where Rabbi Meir Simcha suggests that the evil inclination is irrelevant to the angels because they are so close to the *Shekhina* and see it eye to eye; in such a reality, a person automatically has no desire at all to sin. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. We should note the difficulty in these verses: Does Yaakov condition the Lord's being his God on his returning to his parents' house?! It seems that both verses set out the condition: If the Lord will in fact be my God all along the way, for that is how I will feel and perceive Him, then He will watch over me and return me to my father's house. If all of this will be fulfilled, Yaakov commits himself in the next verse to erect this stone as a pillar, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See *Tosafot*, *Berakhot* 2a; *Meiri*, *Berakhot* 4b; *Magen Avraham* 239:2 and elsewhere. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)