**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARASHAT KI TETZE**

**The War Against the Evil Inclination**

**I. The Rebellious Son**

One of the most mysterious sections in the Torah is that of the rebellious son (*ben sorer u-moreh*)*.* It is difficult to imagine a case in which a child’s father and mother would come to the court and ask that he be executed. The limitations placed by Rabbi Yehuda on who could be defined and executed as a *ben sorer u-moreh* make the section even stranger and even less relevant:

Rabbi Yehuda said: If his mother is not like his father in voice, appearance, and stature, he does not become a rebellious son. (*Sanhedrin* 71a)

Is it possible that such criteria would be fulfilled? In the wake of these words, the Gemara further cites:

That which was taught [in a *beraita*]:There never has been a "stubborn and rebellious son," and never will be. Why then was [this law] written? [That you may] study and receive reward…

For it has been taught: Rabbi Shimon said: Because one eats a *tarteimar* of meat and drinks half a *log* of Italian wine, his father and mother bring him to be stoned?! Rather, it never happened and never will happen. Why then was [this law] written? [That you may] study and receive reward. (Ibid.)

According to this, we are dealing here with a passage that was never intended to serve as the *halakha* in practice, but only to teach us educational and spiritual principles. I will not elaborate on the educational principles here, but on a fascinating and significant spiritual principle that the *Or Ha-Chaim* learns from here.

**II. Preventing Listening**

As in many places, here too the *Or Ha-Chaim* reaches his novel insight from a precise reading of the verse:

"When a man will have a stubborn and rebellious son; he does not [*einenu*] listen to the voice of his father…" – One must understand why the Torah writes *einenu*, for it should have said *eino*. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Devarim* 21:18)

The *Or Ha-Chaim* understands that the negation implied by *einenu* is a more significant negation than simply not listening to one's parents. This is how he explains the absence of listening on the part of the rebellious son:

Perhaps the Torah wanted to emphasize that when a person allows the evil inclination to dominate within him, this deprives him of his normal knowledge and ability to hear what is said to him. This is because the evil inclination stands at the entrance to the person's heart and prevents words from reaching the soul, because they would force it to leave. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

One of the actions and modes of influence of the evil inclination is that it prevents words of rebuke from reaching a person. We usually talk about the evil inclination as the side of a person's soul that persuades him to commit transgressions and not to listen to the Creator, but here the *Or Ha-Chaim* emphasizes a different element – that the evil inclination prevents a person from hearing and accepting words of rebuke.

This idea is emphasized in clear formulation by the Admor of Slonim, author of *Netivot Shalom*, in his teaching for *Parashat Eikev*:

"Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiff-necked" (*Devarim* 10:16). And Rashi writes (ad loc.): "The foreskin of your heart – the closure and cover that is on your heart." And the Baal Shem Tov explains this double language, “the closure and cover” – that on account of a person's sins, his heart becomes closed, as *Chazal* said (*Yoma* 39a): "Sin obstructs the heart of man…” This is closure of the heart. Apart from this, a covering is also formed on the heart which seals the ear of the heart, and because of it, the person cannot hear the words of God from those who rebuke him. No matter how many words of rebuke are spoken to his heart, they fall on sealed ears, because his heart is covered and does not at all receive what is spoken to him. This is even worse than an obstructed heart. (*Netivot Shalom*, *Eikev*, "Circumcise the foreskin of your heart")

The reason for this phenomenon is simple: rebuke would cause the person to deny the evil inclination its power, and therefore the latter does not allow him to receive the rebuke. In other words, it is difficult for a person to admit his sins, and therefore, the deeper he immerses himself in sin, the more he tries to justify his actions, and this includes removing from himself any capacity to accept rebuke.

The *Or Ha-Chaim* offers a parable to explain:

I have compared the matter to a king whose security guards were thieves and robbers. Can one imagine that these guards would permit their victims, who want to complain to the king that they have been robbed, to gain entrance to the king's palace, and thereby help incriminate themselves? Our situation is similar. This is what the verse states: "When a man will have a stubborn and rebellious son; he does not listen to the voice of his father" – that is, he is denied the capacity to hear, for the words of rebuke will not reach him because of the block that is sitting at the entrance to his heart. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

The principle according to which the evil inclination prevents a person from engaging in repentance also appears twice in the words of the *Or Ha-Chaim* on the past two *parashot* that we read.

In *Parashat Shoftim*, when the Torah commands about going out to war, the *Or Ha-Chaim* compares Israel's wars with its enemies to the war fought by each individual against his evil inclination:

"When you go out to the war" (*Devarim* 20:1) – Perhaps the verse alludes to the battle man fights against his evil inclination. It intends to remove fear from your heart, saying "when you go out to *the* war" [*la-milchama*] – the most well-known war, the most crucial one. There are two difficulties in this battle that are apt to weaken one’s power [to resist the attacker]. 1) He has not been trained to fight this particular adversary in the way that the adversary, the evil inclination, has been trained to fight him. 2) The very composition of man is such that it embraces whatever the evil inclination says to him about the prohibitions to steal, and to rob, and to be arrogant, and to eat whatever he desires. This obstructs him from listening to the words of the Torah and the *mitzvot.* These difficulties are multiplied once man has sinned repeatedly and his deeds have created forces which aid the evil inclination in his fight against him, as I have explained on numerous occasions.[[1]](#footnote-1) (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Devarim* 20:1)

Here the *Or Ha-Chaim* adds another layer and explains in two ways how the evil inclination causes the conduits of a person's hearing to become blocked. An essential part of man's composition, as he explains it, is the evil inclination. This is why the evil inclination is perceived not as something negative or evil, but as a natural part of the person, and therefore it is easy for a person to justify his actions and explain why he is not guilty – for this is simply his nature. And second, the *Or Ha-Chaim* describes how the evil actions themselves give rise to an evil spiritual power that taints the person's soul and turns it into something more evil.

The second place is in *Parashat Re'eh*, where the Torah speaks about a *meisit*, one who entices others to worship idols. The *Or Ha-Chaim* explains this too in terms of an allusion to the evil inclination, which seduces a person on four levels to refrain from doing good:

"If your brother entices you" (*Devarim* 13:7) – In this section, God alludes to a great point regarding the types of enticement that come to a person from **within** himself, to turn him away from the good and right path.

Know that there is a *meisit* that comes with a person **from the day he is first in the world**. As *Chazal* say (*Sanhedrin* 91b) regarding the verse: "Sin crouches at the door" (*Bereishit* 4:7) – it entices man to do evil.

There is there is also a second force of *meisit* born in a person **through transgression**; if he violates a commandment, there is born in him the force of a desire for wickedness. This is the mystical dimension of the statement (*Avot* 4:2) that "one sin drags another." Men of truth [i.e., kabbalists] have spoken at length about this subject, explaining that through every sin, one acquires an accuser, which in turn increases the power of the original evil inclination within us. And thus two, and thus three – the more a person sins, the more powerful grows the enticement to sin within him. For this reason, *Chazal* said (*Berakhot* 34b) that in a place where repentant sinners stand, even absolutely righteous people cannot stand.

Further, through a person’s turning to a path of no good, a third power surrounds him, which is an [additional] **evil soul**. Just as one who strengthens himself in the ways of God is granted an additional soul [spiritually positive force, such as on Shabbat] – in the same way, through [following] evil paths, one acquires an additional evil soul to cause him to sin.

There is further added from this a fourth element, which is to enter one’s soul into a final realm, so that **his soul attaches and becomes integrated with the evil portion** and equates its nature to it, [so that instead of merely becoming the victim of enticement,] this is the final determination of a person’s soul to deny the essence [of Judaism] and serve idolatry. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Devarim* 13:7)

The second level relates precisely to the point that the *Or Ha-Chaim* raises in his commentary to our verse. He cites the *mishna* in *Avot* that states that one sin drags another in its wake, and explains it as follows: After the first sin, the person is already not receptive to rebuke, because the commission of the sin arouses within him the power and the desire to do more evil. That is to say, the sin is problematic not only because of the action itself performed by the person, but because of its impact on the person's soul. When a person behaves in a morally or spiritually corrupt manner, something in his soul is corrupted so that it is more prone to sin and harder to repair.

**III. The Iniquities that Separate**

A verse in *Yeshayahu* explains what transgressions do to a person spiritually:

But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you, that He will not hear. (*Yeshayahu* 59:2)

There are several explanations of this separation. The Rambam in *Hilkhot Teshuva* explains that the verse refers to the closeness and connection between man and his Creator:

How exalted is the level of repentance! **Previously**, the [transgressor] was separate from God, the Lord of Israel, as it is stated: "**But your iniquities have separated between you and your God**" (*Yeshayahu* 59:2). He would call out [to God] without being answered, as it is stated: "When you make many prayers, [I will not hear]" (*Yeshayahu* 1:15). He would fulfill *mitzvot*, only to have them crushed before him, as it is stated: "Who has required this at your hand, to trample My courts?" (*Yeshayahu* 1:12), and as it is stated: "Oh that there were even one among you that would shut the doors, [that you might not kindle fire on My altar in vain]" (*Malakhi* 1:10). **Now**, he is clinging to the *Shekhina*, as it is stated: "But you that did cleave to the Lord your God [are alive every one of you this day]" (*Devarim* 4:4). He calls out [to God] and is answered immediately, as it is stated: "And it shall come to pass that, before they call, I will answer" (*Yeshayahu* 65:24). He fulfills [*mitzvot*](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1438516/jewish/Mitzvah.htm) and they are accepted with pleasure and joy, as it is stated: "God has already accepted your works" (*Kohelet* 9:7). Moreover, [God] desires them, as it is stated: "Then shall the offering of Yehuda and Jerusalem be pleasant to the Lord, as in the days of old, and as in ancient years" (*Malakhi* 3:4). (Rambam, *Hilkhot Teshuva* 7:7)

The Admor Ha-Zaken offers a different perspective. He explains that at every moment, the soul receives vitality from God. However, transgressions, which in their essence are actions against God's will, impair, as it were, God's ability to enter the soul. Therefore, when a person sins, it is as if he removes the *Shekhina* from his midst. He writes as follows:

The simple meaning of the verse "He breathed" (*Bereishit* 2:7) is to show us that just as, for example, if one blows in some direction, and there is any separation or obstruction there, then the exhaled breath will not reach that place at all — so precisely, if anything separates and obstructs between man's body and the "breath" of the Supreme One. The truth, however, is that nothing material or spiritual is a barrier before Him – "Do I not fill heaven and earth!" "All the world is full of His glory." "There is no place devoid of Him." "In the heavens above and on the earth below there is none else." "He fills all worlds." But Yeshayahu declares: "**But your iniquities have separated between you and your God**." The reason is that sins oppose the Supreme will who gives life to all. (*Tanya*, *Iggeret ha-Teshuva*, chap. 5)

In contrast to these interpretations, which see man's iniquities as separating between him and God, the *Or Ha-Chaim's* interpretation allows for a novel explanation of the verse.

The end of the verse explains what the separation causes:

…and your sins have hidden His face from you, that He will not hear. (*Yeshayahu* 59:2)

It can be explained that sins create a separation that prevents a person from hearing the voice of God – "that **he** [=the person] will not hear." As a result, the paths of repentance are closed to him, and it becomes much more difficult to abandon the sin and engage in repair. This may also be the intention of Rav Huna:

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 fact that the offense is already considered to be permitted, and the person finds excuses as to why the offense is actually not prohibited, prevents the person from being able to accept rebuke and consider his actions in an objective manner.

**IV. Beating on the heart or on the chest?**

In his commentary to our *parasha*, the *Or Ha-Chaim* refers to the Gemara in *Berakhot* (61a) which identifies the "entrance to the heart" as the seat of the evil inclination. In other words, the evil inclination sits at the entrance to the heart and prevents words of rebuke from entering. The *Me'orei Or* (a commentary to the *Or Ha-Chaim*) suggests that based on this, we can understand a dispute among the *Acharonim* regarding the traditional confession that we recite. In *Midrash Kohelet*,it is stated that one should beat his heart while reciting the confession, because that is the site of sin:

And why do we beat the heart? To say that it all comes from there. (*Kohelet Rabba* 7, 9)

The *Magen Avraham* brings a dispute about the precise location where one is to strike:

And one should beat with his fist on his chest [*Kitvei ha-Ari*]. And in *Midrash Kohelet* it is stated that one should beat his heart, to say that you caused me [to sin]. (*Magen Avraham*, *Orach Chaim* 607, 3)

According to *Midrash Kohelet*, one beats the heart. Why then does the Ari require that one strike the chest? The *Sha'ar Ha-Kavanot* brings an explanation based on *Kabbala*, but the *Me'orei Or* proposes an explanation based on the commentary of the *Or Ha-Chaim* and the Gemara in *Berakhot*: The evil inclination that sits at the entrance to the heart – i.e., the chest – is what prevents a person from repenting; therefore, when one seeks forgiveness, one should beat it so it will leave its place and allow the person to receive rebuke and engage in repentance.

**V. Back to the Rebellious Son**

The *Or Ha-Chaim's* interpretations often appear to be mere allusions that are not really connected to the plain meaning of the verses. In this case, the evil inclination is not mentioned at all in the text! It seems that we should try to understand how his words arise even from the plain meaning of the verses.

In Chasidism, it is customary to say that the sections dealing with war in *Parashot Shoftim* and *Ki Tetze* are deliberately read during the period of mercy and forgiveness in the month of Elul, when we deal with each and every individual's constant war with his own evil inclination. But beyond that, it seems that in our case, even the plain meaning of the verses alludes to the profound point raised here by the *Or Ha-Chaim*.

The *Or Ha-Chaim* learns what he says from the wording of the verse, which describes the resistance of the rebellious son with the term *einenu*, rather than *eino.* But the word *eino* is not used at all in the Torah, whereas the word *einenu* is found in seven places. This being the case, it is difficult to base the novel understanding that a rebellious son is not open to accept criticism solely on a precise reading of the verses. On the other hand, when you look at the section as a whole, the understanding emerges clearly that the primary issue with a rebellious son is his inability to listen.

Rabbi Yose ha-Galilee asks a pertinent question:

And because he ate a *tarteimar* of meat and drank half a *log* of Italian wine, the Torah said he shall be brought before the court and stoned? (*Sanhedrin* 72a)

Indeed, a difficult question: Why is the punishment of a rebellious son so severe, that for stealing money and eating meat and wine, he is sentenced to stoning? The Gemara answers that indeed a rebellious son is not condemned for his actions, but for his "ultimate destiny":

The Torah “arrived” at the ultimate destiny of the *ben sorer u-moreh*. For eventually, after dissipating his father's wealth and [still] seeking to satisfy his accustomed [gluttonous] habits, but being unable to do so, he will go forth at the cross roads and rob people. The Torah said: Let him die while yet innocent, and let him not die guilty. (Ibid.)

One must ask: From where does the Torah know that this boy will indeed turn into a robber? Where does this pessimism come from? Maybe he will return to the good upright path, his father and mother will succeed in educating him, and he will grow up to be a good, proper Jew!

If we accept the *Or Ha-Chaim's* reading of the section regarding the evil inclination and relate it to the rebellious son, the matter is clear. With one whose heart is so closed that it is no longer open to accept rebuke, indeed there is no chance that he will return to the right path. The first step in returning to the good path requires an ability to listen and to confess one's wrongdoing. Only when a son is in such a state that it is totally impossible to talk to him will his father and mother say about him: "he does not listen to us."

It need not be repeated, as mentioned at the beginning of the *shiur*, that according to Rabbi Yehuda, there never was and never will be a rebellious son. The mitzvawas given, however, so that one may study it and receive reward: We must not reach a state in which the evil inclination so dominates us that it blocks our hearts from listening.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Editor’s note: Many of the translations of the *Or Ha-Chaim*’s commentary in this series are aided, to varying degrees, by the explanation of Rabbi Eliyahu Munk, available at Sefaria.org. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)