NITZOTZOS
Keeping Our Spark Alive

SHOFTIM / TESHUVAH / IDENTITY

The Venom of Sin

How an aveirah attacks not only behavior, but identity - and how Torah restores the person beneath the shame

> *"The yetzer hara wins once when it causes us to sin. It wins a second time when it convinces us that the sin is who we are. That second victory is the venom."*

WRITTEN BY

Rav Mordechai Burg



THE TORAH'S QUESTION

In Parshas Shoftim, the Torah describes a person who intentionally murders another Jew and then attempts to find refuge in one of the *arei miklat*:

> DEVARIM 19:11
>
> וְכִי יִהְיֶה אִישׁ שֹׂנֵא לְרֵעֵהוּ וְאָרַב לוֹ וְקָם עָלָיו וְהִכָּהוּ נֶפֶשׁ וָמֵת
>
> *"But if a man hates his fellow, lies in wait for him, rises against him, and strikes him mortally..."*

Rashi notes that the Torah appears to include an unnecessary detail. Why does the Torah need to tell us that the murderer hated his victim? It could simply have said that one man ambushed another and killed him.

Quoting the Sifrei, Rashi explains that the murder did not begin when the man lay in wait for his victim. It began much earlier, when he allowed himself to hate another Jew. First, he violated *Lo sisna es achicha bilvavecha* - "You shall not hate your brother in your heart." Ultimately, that hatred brought him to shed blood. This, says Rashi, is the principle of *aveirah goreres aveirah*: once a person transgresses a seemingly minor aveirah, he may eventually come to violate a far more serious one.

But how exactly does this halacha demonstrate the principle of *aveirah goreres aveirah*? The progression from hatred to murder sounds like a natural psychological pathology. A person nurtures his resentment. The resentment grows into an obsession. If it is never confronted, it may eventually erupt into violence. One does not need to know that hatred is an aveirah for that to happen. The fact that hatred is an aveirah seems to be of no consequence to the downward spiral that ends in murder.

What, then, is the Torah teaching us about the spiritual dynamic of sin itself?

A second, even more troubling question, emerges from the continuation of the pesukim. After instructing the elders to remove the murderer from the city of refuge and hand him over for execution, the Torah says:

> DEVARIM 19:13
>
> לֹא תָחוֹס עֵינְךָ עָלָיו
>
> *"Your eye shall not pity him."*

Rashi explains the pity the Torah is warning against. We might say: One Jew has already been killed. Why should we now kill another and leave two Jews dead?

Clearly, then, the Torah is addressing a case in which Beis Din possesses the halachic authority to execute the murderer. But such cases were exceedingly rare. The Mishnah (Makkos 7a) teaches that a Sanhedrin that executed once in seven years was considered destructive; Rav Elazar ben Azariah says even once in seventy years.

The requirements for conviction were extraordinarily demanding. Two valid witnesses had to warn the murderer immediately before the crime. They had to tell him that the act was forbidden and carried the death penalty. Silence was insufficient. Even saying, "I know," was insufficient. The murderer had to respond, *Al menas kein ani oseh* - I understand, and I am doing it anyway - and then commit the crime within *toch k'dei dibbur* - literally, "within the time required for speech," the brief span needed to utter a short phrase (see Rambam, Hilchos Sanhedrin 12:2).

This murderer had so many ways to avoid execution by Beis Din. He could have remained silent. He could have paused for several seconds before murdering his victim. Yet when he was warned that the act would cost him his life, he openly accepted the consequence and immediately struck the fatal blow.

His hatred was directed toward his victim. Why was he so willing to destroy himself?

THE INNER MECHANISM OF AVEIRAH

When Hatred Turns Inward

Rav Yochanan Zweig shlit'a explains that to answer these questions, we must understand what an aveirah does to the person who commits it.

We tend to imagine that an aveirah is something we did. It may have harmed another person. It may have damaged our relationship with Hashem. But once the act is over, we remain essentially the same person we were before.

It does not work that way.

Every action leaves something behind in the person who performed it. When I repeatedly behave beneath my dignity, I begin to experience myself as someone without

dignity. When I treat another human being as worthless, something in me begins to feel worthless as well.

This is particularly true of hatred. In order to sustain hatred, I must gradually strip the other person of his humanity. I tell myself that he does not matter, that his pain does not count, that he is not really my brother.

But perhaps the hatred did not begin with the other person at all. Sometimes what I cannot tolerate within myself gets projected onto someone else. I attack in him the weakness, shame or worthlessness I secretly fear is in me. The other person becomes the screen onto which I project my own self-hatred. In that case, the hatred does not eventually turn inward. It was directed inward all along.

Either way, the hatred he feeds does not leave his inner world untouched. It deepens the very self-contempt from which it may have begun.

This is the inner mechanism of *aveirah goreres aveirah*. The first aveirah does not simply make the next aveirah more tempting. It changes the way I see myself. Once I identify as someone degraded, I begin to behave in ways consistent with that identity.

Guilt says, "I did something wrong." Shame says, "What I did reveals who I really am."

There is a world of difference between guilt and shame. Guilt says, "I did something wrong." Shame says, "What I did reveals who I really am."

If I did something terrible, then I can do teshuvah. I can admit what I did, repair whatever can still be repaired and make a different choice going forward. But once the aveirah becomes my identity, teshuvah begins to feel almost fraudulent. What is the point of changing my behavior if, deep down, this is simply who I am? At that point, the person is no longer looking for a way to repair what he has done. He just wants relief from the pain of being himself.

Rav Zweig suggests that this is the murderer the Torah is describing. His hatred of another Jew has either turned into hatred of himself or exposed the self-hatred that was already there. Sustained hatred corrodes the humanity of the person doing the hating until his attack on another becomes an attack on himself. He cannot tolerate the person he has become. He may not be willing to take his own life directly, but when the witnesses offer him a path toward his own destruction, he takes it. Killing his enemy

promises one moment of satisfaction. Being killed by the court offers an escape from himself.

This is what Chazal mean when they say that the yetzer hara "seeks to kill" a person:

KIDDUSHIN 30B

יִצְרוֹ שֶׁל אָדָם מִתְגַּבֵּר עָלָיו בְּכָל יוֹם וּמְבַקֵּשׁ הֲמִיתוֹ

A person's yetzer overpowers him each day and seeks to kill him.

The yetzer hara is a killer. It used his hatred to destroy the victim, and then it used the resulting shame to destroy him as well.

The Baal Shem Tov compared an aveirah to a snakebite. The bite is dangerous, but the venom that spreads afterward is far more deadly. The bite is the aveirah. The venom is the voice that says: Look what you did. Look what you have become. You are disgusting. You are lost. Why bother trying anymore?

Once a person believes that voice, the yetzer hara has accomplished far more than causing one sin. It has persuaded the person that there is no one left worth saving.

CONCEALMENT IS NOT EXTINCTION

The Stars Remain

An amazing talmid, someone whom I consider one of my own rebbeim, recently sent me the following message:

> *"In Kobe Kollel one night, we went to this beautiful lake in the middle of nowhere. There were silhouettes of mountain ranges in the distance. Everything was completely silent except for the sounds of crickets and flowing lake water, while smooth rocks crunched beneath my feet. When I looked up, I saw the sky, a gorgeous sky with stars and planets shining above me.*
>
> *I was sitting and looking at the water when suddenly I felt a breeze. As I glanced up, I saw a big grey cloud that concealed most of the glowing stars. There were a few stars poking through the clouds, but I was still disappointed at the change of view and looked down toward the lake. When I looked back up, the cloud was gone. Lo and behold, the stars were*

> *back out. They did not last for long, as another cloud came back and blocked the sky. Back and forth, clouds, stars, clouds, stars.*
>
> *Eventually, a big dense cloud came that covered the whole sky, and I did not think it would be gone before I left. After all, there are cloudy and rainy days that can last for days and weeks. But we know they will not remain forever. Eventually, when they go away, we will once again see those breathtaking starry nights.*
>
> *Every Yid is a bright light. Unfortunately, many people, at many points in their lives, go through pain and darkness. A dark cloud covers up that light, leaving us depressed and disappointed. We experience grief, loneliness, shame, feelings of unworthiness and so much more. In those moments, we think that this pain, this darkness, will never leave us. Sometimes we even have moments of happiness that peek through these difficult feelings. Yet the cloud returns and covers up its weak spots, hiding our light once again.*
>
> *But what we always need to remember is that although it may feel like we are being swallowed by the darkness, and we do not know how there can be any spark left, the clouds come and go while the stars remain. The pain and darkness will come and go, but a Yid's bright light will shine forever."*

A cloud can conceal a star, but it cannot extinguish it.

This is not an attempt to pretend that the cloud is not real. There are clouds that are so thick that a person cannot see even the faintest trace of light. An aveirah is real. The damage it causes is real. The shame can be overwhelming. But concealment is not the same thing as extinction. The mistake is to confuse what currently covers the light with the light itself.

THE ANTIDOTE

The Word That Saves Us

What, then, is the antidote?

The Gemara continues:

KIDDUSHIN 30B

תָּנָא דְּבֵי רַבִּי יִשְׁמָעֵאל: בְּנִי, אִם פָּגַע בְּךָ מְנוּוָל זֶה — מְשָׁכֵהוּ לְבֵית הַמִּדְרָשׁ

The school of Rabbi Yishmael taught: "My son, if this despicable one encounters you, draw him into the Beis Midrash."

Every word of this Gemara contains a brilliant psychological principle.

The Gemara begins, *Bni* - my son.

Before telling the person what to do, Chazal tell him who he is.

Bni.

Before telling the person what to do, Chazal tell him who he is. You are not the *menuval*. You are not disgusting. You are not the sum total of your worst desire or your worst decision.

You are *bni*.

The yetzer hara's most devastating move is to fuse the person with the aveirah. If I committed this sin, it must reveal my true identity. Chazal carefully separate the two. The person is called *bni*. The yetzer hara is called *menuval zeh*, the despicable one.

The Gemara then says, *Im paga becha* - if this menuval encounters you. An encounter is something that happens to you. It is not the totality of who you are. If the yetzer hara and I are one and the same, who exactly is left to fight? But if I can say, "This is something I am experiencing, but it is not who I am," that distinction creates the small amount of inner space necessary for choice. If I am evil, there is no one left to resist evil. But if I am a beloved child of Hashem currently being confronted by something that wants to pull me away from myself, then the struggle can begin. Even in the middle of the struggle, I remain *bni*.

And then Chazal say, *Mashcheihu* - pull it.

Usually, when the yetzer hara encounters us, it does the pulling. One thought leads to another. One compromise makes the next one easier. Before long, we have been dragged far away from the person we intended to be. Chazal empower us with the understanding

that we are always capable of reversing the direction. Do not allow the yetzer hara to pull you any farther. Grab hold of it and bring it with you into the Beis Midrash.

Bring the desire. Bring the confusion. Bring the shame.

The Beis Midrash is not only for people who have already won their battles. It is the place where we bring the battle itself.

Shame grows in secrecy. The thought I am afraid to examine becomes increasingly powerful because it is allowed to live in the dark. In the Beis Midrash, I can shine a light on it. I can challenge the story it is telling me and place it within the larger story of my life.

This is how Torah restores a person's identity. Shame takes one true fact - I committed an aveirah - and uses it to create a devastating lie: the aveirah is the deepest truth about me. Torah does not deny the fact. It does not minimize the seriousness of what I have done. It simply refuses to accept the lie.

The light of the Beis Midrash does not only allow me to see the aveirah more clearly. It allows me to see myself more clearly. It tells me that although I have sinned, I am still a Jew and my inner purity remains untouched. The aveirah may be part of my story, but it is not the whole story. Like the cloud, it may conceal the light. It cannot extinguish it.

HOW TORAH MEETS THE PERSON

Water and Fire

KIDDUSHIN 30B

אִם אֶבֶן הוּא — נִימּוֹחַ, וְאִם בַּרְזֶל הוּא — מִתְפּוֹצֵץ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: הֲלוֹא כֹה דְבָרִי כָאֵשׁ נְאֻם ה' וּכְפַטִּישׁ יְפֹצֵץ סָלַע. אִם אֶבֶן הוּא — נִימּוֹחַ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: הוֹי כָּל צָמֵא לְכוּ לַמַּיִם, וְאוֹמֵר: אֲבָנִים שָׁחֲקוּ מָיִם.

If it is stone, it will melt; and if it is iron, it will shatter, as it is stated: "Is not My word like fire, says Hashem, and like a hammer that shatters rock?" If it is stone, it will melt, as it is stated: "Ho, everyone who is thirsty, go to the water," and it states: "Water wears away stones."

If the yetzer hara is stone, it will be worn away. If it is iron, it will break apart. Torah is compared both to fire and to a hammer that shatters rock. It is also compared to water, which slowly wears away stone.

Why does the Gemara require two different images? If Torah defeats the yetzer hara, simply tell us that Torah is stronger. Why must we know whether the yetzer hara has become stone or iron?

Perhaps the Gemara is describing two different ways that sin and shame can take hold of a person.

STONE

Sometimes a person becomes like stone. He does not aggressively defend what he has done. He has simply stopped feeling. After failing in the same area again and again, something inside him shuts down. He no longer wants to think about the aveirah, his relationship with Hashem or the person he might still become. He goes through the motions, but without much hope that anything will ever change.

This is the coldness of stone. It is the numbness of a person who has been disappointed in himself too many times. Shame has convinced him that there is no point in trying, so he protects himself by no longer caring.

For that person, Torah becomes water.

The water does not merely wear away the stone. It reveals the thirst buried beneath it: *Hoi kol tzamei lechu lamayim* - everyone who is thirsty, come to the water. Beneath the numbness, the person still wants to live differently. The Torah does not manufacture that thirst. It helps him feel it again.

Water rarely changes stone in one dramatic moment. It returns to the same place again and again. At first, there is no visible difference. But one drop finds a small opening. Another follows it. Slowly, what appeared completely sealed begins to soften.

Shame speaks in absolutes: You always fail. You will never change. There is no point. Those absolutes become harder to believe when a person repeatedly encounters a Torah that continues to show him his inner ratzon to be close to Hashem.

IRON

At other times, the yetzer hara becomes like iron. Iron is not numb or passive. It is strength organized into a defense.

Sometimes the shame of admitting what I have done is so painful that I protect myself by hardening. I rationalize. I become angry at anyone who challenges me. I convince

myself that the aveirah is not really an aveirah, that everyone else is a hypocrite, or that I was forced into doing what I did. The more threatened I feel, the harder the armor becomes. I am no longer simply hiding from the truth. I am fighting against it.

For that person, Torah becomes fire.

Rashi explains that the fire of Torah is *mefa'apea es habarzel* - it penetrates the iron. Fire reaches places that the iron armor was designed to protect. Under enough heat, even metal that seemed rigid can become pliable.

Torah melts the armor through the fire of love. Shame tells me that if the truth about me is ever exposed, I will be rejected. That fear is why the armor exists in the first place. I rationalize, blame and deny because I am terrified that if I admit what I have done, there will be nothing left in me worthy of love.

Torah gives me a very different experience. Hashem sees the aveirah more clearly than I do, and He still calls me *bni*. His love does not excuse what I have done, but neither is it withdrawn because of what I have done. Love does not say that the aveirah is acceptable. It says that the sinner is still beloved. In the warmth of that relationship, I no longer need to defend the aveirah in order to defend myself. I can allow the truth in without experiencing it as a death sentence.

This is the fire of love. It does not burn the person. It melts the armor that has kept him from being honest.

Once he knows that he can be fully seen without being abandoned, teshuvah becomes possible.

Sometimes the yetzer hara cools a person, making him sluggish in the performance of mitzvos, and sometimes heats him, driving him passionately toward an aveirah (see Aruch LaNer, Sukkah 52b). We might say that shame has these same two faces. Sometimes it freezes us. Sometimes it inflames us. Torah can be water and Torah can be fire. It knows how to meet us in both places.

THE DIGNITY OF ONE NEW CHOICE

Beginning Again

The greatest protection against aveirah is not the belief that I am perfect. It is the knowledge that my failures are not the deepest truth about me.

That knowledge produces dignity. My dignity forces me to ask: Why would I do something that demeans my own neshamah? Which choices are aligned with the person I truly am? What is one area in which I can begin living like myself again?

When a person takes even one small commitment and keeps it, he begins to trust himself again. The mitzvah does not create his value. It allows him to experience the value that was there all along. One choice becomes evidence that another choice is possible. This is the constructive power of *mitzvah goreres mitzvah*. Just as an aveirah can shape a person's identity downward, a mitzvah can restore his awareness of who he truly is.

The yetzer hara wins once when it causes us to sin. It wins a second time when it convinces us that the sin is who we are. That second victory is the venom.

Chazal teach us how to draw out the poison. *Bni.* You are still My child. Bring the struggle into the Beis Midrash. Let the water reach the places that have gone numb. Let the fire penetrate the armor.

Come while the clouds are still there.
Come while you are still struggling.

We often think that we must first clear away the clouds before we can return to Hashem. The Gemara says exactly the opposite. Come while the clouds are still there. Come while you are still struggling. You do not enter the Beis Midrash because you already feel like *bni.* You enter because Hashem has never stopped calling you *bni.*