

Parashat Noach, 5780, 2019:

## *Encountering the Yetzer Harah*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Parashat Noach is preeminently the story of the Flood that destroyed the vast majority of life on earth. Noach and his immediate family were saved, however, since “he was a righteous man who was perfect in his generations [and] found favor in the eyes of Hashem.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 6:8,9) Upon Noach’s emergence from the Ark, Hashem uttered an eternal oath: “I will no longer curse the earth because of man, *ki yetzer lev ha’adam rah* (for the inclination of man’s heart is evil) from his youth, and I will no longer smite all living things as I have done.” (8:21, this and the following Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach* with my emendations) The phrase, *ki yetzer lev ha’adam rah* parallels an earlier expression in the *Chumash* preceding Hashem’s decision to destroy the world by the Flood: “And the L-rd saw that the evil of man was great in the earth, *v’chol yetzer machshavat libo* (and every inclination of his heart) was only evil (*rah*) all the time.” (*Sefer Bereishit* 6:5) Both of these verses connect the word “*yetzer*” to the word “*rah*,” and thereby introduce us to the concept of the *yetzer harah* (the evil inclination).

*Yetzer harah* is an often used but rarely understood expression. We are fortunate that *Talmud Bavli, Succah* 52a leads us to a better understanding of this term:

Rabbi Avira or, as some say, Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, made the following exposition: The

*yetzer harah* has seven names. The Holy One, blessed be He, called it *rah* (Evil)...Moses called it *aral* (the Uncircumcised)...David called it *tamei* (Unclean)...[King] Solomon called it *sonai* (the Enemy)...Isaiah [the prophet] called it the *michshol* (Stumbling-Block)...Ezekiel [the prophet] called it *even* (Stone)...Joel [the prophet] called it the *tzefoni* (Hidden One)...(Translation, *The Soncino Talmud* with my emendations)

Rav Ya'akov Ettlinger (1798-1871) explains that these names for the *yetzer harah* may actually be understood as “seven different aspects that cause the *yetzer harah* to be such a monumental challenge for the Jewish people.” (*Aruch L’Ner, Succah 52a*, this and the following translations and summary my own) He then proceeds to explain each name and its underlying significance. *Rah* teaches us that the inclination to do evil is the source of all varieties of sins, and can bring us to terrible forms of death. Moreover, “there is no kind of evil greater than this, which is why the Holy One blessed be He called it *rah*.” *Aral* indicates the aspect of the human personality that, “stands before that which is good, to prevent it from entering the hearts of humankind...” *Tamei* refers to the ability of the *yetzer harah* to “render impure even those holy and pure thoughts that have already entered a person’s mind...” *Sonai* “not only affects one who seeks to be under its influence; rather it lies in wait in order to capture a person’s very soul, just as an enemy would do to another...” *Michshol* exemplifies the *yetzer harah*’s ability to injure even someone who can resist obvious forms of evil, as “it continuously schemes and harasses such a person in subtle ways just like a stumbling block in the road can easily cause one to trip and fall when they are unaware of its presence...” *Even* reflects the “physical” characteristic of the *yetzer harah*, in the sense that it is “hard and heavy like a stone.” Finally, *tzefoni*:

...refers to that aspect of the evil inclination that is hidden within the heart of a person until they fail to recognize it is lurking within them...As a result, a person might very well think that they are performing a *mitzvah*, when, in fact, they do not know that they are being driven by the advice of the *yetzer harah* that has totally penetrated their very essence. Therefore, a person must ever be on guard and must take the necessary steps to recognize the hidden actions of the *yetzer harah*.

Rav Ettlinger's trenchant analysis of the *yetzer harah* goes a long way in helping us understand why it is such a formidable foe, and why we must always be ready to face it head-on, and avoid all-too-ready rationalizations and acts of self-deception. As Hashem told Cain so long ago, "Is it not so that if you improve, it will be forgiven you? If you do not improve, however, at the entrance, sin is lying, and to you is its longing, but you can rule over it." (*Sefer Bereishit* 4:7)

With Hashem's kind help and our fervent desire, may each of us be *zocheh* (merit) to fulfill *Dovid HaMelech's* (King David's) inspiring words: *Sur m'rah v'aseh tov..*" — "Turn away from evil and do good..." (*Sefer Tehillim* 34:15) *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>  
They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha's* name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.