

How to Live Sin-Free



Self-sabotage is a strange phenomenon. It positions you as the protagonist and antagonist of your life, working for and against your own interests. Yet, we all encounter it one way or another: staying up later than we should, returning to harmful behaviors, yelling at someone when we know we'll regret it. (You can even hear yourself telling yourself to stop, and then you respond to yourself that you don't care.)

In Judaism, one can attribute those behaviors to the *yetzer harah*—the will of bad, colloquially translated as the evil inclination. It is this ... entity, if you will, that obstructs our path toward better decisions and better lives. How does one combat an enemy that lives within? With its usual no-shortage-of-ideas attitude, the Talmud has timeless teachings for this universal struggle.

1. Berakhot 5a: Torah, Shema, and Death

אמר רבי לוי בר חמא, אמר רבי שמעון בן לקיש: לעולם ירגיז אדם יצר טוב על יצר הרע, שנאמר: "רגזו ואל תחטאו" אם נצחו מוטב, ואם לאו יעסוק בתורה, שנאמר: "אמרו בלבבכם". אם נצחו מוטב, ואם לאו יקרא קריאת שמע, שנאמר: "על משפכם". אם נצחו מוטב, ואם לאו יזכור לו יום המיתה, שנאמר: "ודמו סלה".

Incidental to the verse, "Tremble, and do not sin," the Gemara mentions that Rabbi Levi bar Ḥama said that Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: One should always incite his good

inclination against his evil inclination, i.e., that one must constantly struggle so that his evil inclination does not lead him to transgression, as it is stated: “Tremble, and do not sin.” If one succeeds and subdues his evil inclination, excellent, but if he does not succeed in subduing it, he should study Torah, as alluded to in the verse: “Say to your heart.” If he subdues his evil inclination, excellent; if not, he should recite *Shema*, which contains the acceptance of the yoke of God, and the concept of reward and punishment, as it is stated in the verse: “Upon your bed,” which alludes to *Shema*, where it says: “When you lie down.” If he subdues his evil inclination, excellent; if not, he should remind himself of the day of death, whose silence is alluded to in the continuation of the verse: “And be still, Selah.”

There are several lines of defense in this passage. First, stick to your natural, human will. Second, turn to Torah study. Third, recite the Shema. Fourth, scare the *yetzer harah* into proper behavior. Whether we each find these mechanisms successful, one thing is clear: Have several means of guiding yourself on the right track when you are caught in a moment of struggle.

2. Sukkah 52a-52b: Rely on God and Torah

רע כל היום". אָמַר רַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן־אֶמְרַת רַבִּי יִצְחָק: יֵצְרוּ שֶׁל אָדָם מֵתַגְבֵּר עָלָיו בְּכָל יוֹם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "רַק לְקַיֵּשׁ: יֵצְרוּ שֶׁל אָדָם מֵתַגְבֵּר עָלָיו בְּכָל יוֹם וּמִבְּקֵשׁ לְהַמִּיתוֹ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "צוֹפֵה רָשָׁע לְצַדִּיק וּמִבְּקֵשׁ לְהַמִּיתוֹ", וְאֵלְמָלָא הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא שְׁעוֹזֵר לוֹ אֵינּוּ יָכוֹל לוֹ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "ה' לֹא יַעֲזֹבֵנוּ בְּיָדוֹ וְלֹא יִרְשָׁעֵנוּ בְּהַשְׁפֵּטוֹ".

Rabbi Yitzhak said: A person's inclination overcomes him each day, as it is stated: "Only evil all day" (Genesis 6:5). All day long his thoughts and desires are for evil. Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: A person's evil inclination overcomes him each day and seeks to kill him, as it stated: "The wicked watches the righteous and seeks to kill him" (Psalms 37:32); the wicked here is referring to the wickedness inside one's heart. And if not for the Holy One, Blessed be He, Who assists him with the good inclination, he would not overcome it, as it is stated: "The Lord will not leave him in his hand, nor suffer him to be condemned when he is judged" (Psalms 37:33).

תֵּנָא דְבִי רַבִּי יִשְׁמַעְאֵל: אִם פָּגַע בְּךָ מְנוּוֹל זֶה אִם מְשַׁכְּהוּ לְבֵית הַמְדַרְשָׁה. אִם אֶבֶן הוּא אִם נִימוֹחַ, אִם בְּרִזָּל הוּא מֵתַפּוּצָץ. אִם אֶבֶן הוּא נִימוֹחַ, דְּכַתִּיב: "הוּי כֹל צִמָּא לְכוּ לְמַיִם", וְכַתִּיב: "אֶבְנִים שֶׁחָקוּ מַיִם". אִם בְּרִזָּל הוּא מֵתַפּוּצָץ, דְּכַתִּיב: "הֲאֵל כֹּה דְבָרִי כָּאֵשׁ נָאִם ה' וְכַפְטִישׁ יַפּוּצֵץ סִלַּע".

The school of Rabbi Yishmael taught: If this scoundrel, the evil inclination, accosted you, seeking to tempt you to sin, drag it to the study hall and study Torah. If it is like a stone, it will be dissolved by the Torah. If it is like iron, it will be shattered. The Gemara elaborates: If it is like stone, it will be dissolved, as it is written: "Ho, everyone who is thirsty, come you for the water" (Isaiah 55:1), water in this context meaning Torah; and it is written: "Stones were worn by water" (Job 14:19). If it is like iron, it will be shattered, as it is written: "Is not My word like fire, says the Lord; and like a hammer

that shatters rock” (Jeremiah 23:29).

3. Avodah Zarah 19b:Do Good

This last piece offers a different approach. Rather than be reactive, it advises being proactive. If you’re doing good, then you’re preoccupied and can’t be doing bad. Learn it here:

מכריז רבי אלכסנדר מין בעי חיי מאן בעי חיי כנוף ואתו כולי עלמא לגביה אמרי ליה הב לן חיי אמר
’להו (תהלים לד, יג) מי האיש החפץ חיים וגו’ נצור לשונך מרע וגו’

The Gemara relates that Rabbi Alexandri would proclaim in public, in the manner of a merchant selling wares: Who desires life? Who desires life? Everyone gathered around him to buy from him, saying to him: Give us life! He stated the following verse to them: “Who is the man that desires life, and loves days, that he may see good in them? Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking guile” (Psalms 34:13-14).

סור מרע ועשה טוב וגו’ שמא יאמר נצרתי לשוני מרע ושפתי מדבר מרמה אלך ואתגרה בשינה ת”ל סור
מרע ועשה טוב אין טוב אלא תורה שנאמר (משלי ד, ב) כי לקח טוב נתתי לכם תורת אל תעזבו

The psalm continues: “Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace and pursue it” (Psalms 34:15). The Gemara explains: Lest one say: I have kept my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking guile, I will therefore go and indulge in sleep. To counter this possibility, the verse states: “Depart from evil, and do good,” i.e., it is not enough to avoid evil, but one must actively do good. And the word good means nothing other than Torah, as it is stated: “For I have given you a good portion; My Torah, do not abandon it” (Proverbs 4:2).

Postscript

In his *Shemoneh Kevatzim*, Rav Kook wrote, “The purely righteous do not complain about evil, rather they increase justice; they do not complain about heresy, rather they increase faith; they do not complain about ignorance, rather they increase wisdom.”

When struggle, hardship, injustice, and evil arrive at our front door, we have two approaches: We can fear and tremble, anxiously speaking about the problem set before us. Or, we can live and learn, proactively imbuing our lives with high energy, good choices, and positive attitudes. This is not to simplify an already complex and difficult challenge—far from it. Rather, these words guide our eyes to the sunshine peeking in through the dark shadows.