

The first prayer I think I learned in Hebrew, and there's a great chance that it was one of your first too, comes from this week's Torah portion: *Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad*.

There is quite a lot that can and has been said about these six words, but what captured my attention this time around is what comes immediately after them. Moses is giving a grand speech here to the Israelites about what God expects of them, how they should live their lives generation after generation, after they cross the Jordan and take possession of the Promised Land. He continues:

*V'ahavta et Adonai Elohecha b'chol l'vav'cha uv'chol nafsh'cha uv'chol m'odecha*.

“You shall love Adonai your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”

Now because “heart” in Hebrew can be spelled as just lamed-bet, *lev*, but is here spelled lamed-bet-bet, *levav*, the sages, in the Mishnah Berakhot, figured spelling it with two letter “bet”s must mean something. And what it could mean is that “with all your heart” refers to loving God in two ways, with both your good side and with your base instincts, your *yetzer hatov* (good inclination) on the one hand and your *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) on the other. All of us possess these two opposing inclinations, we're just so dramatic like that, and if we are to love God with all of ourselves, as this passage is urging, we must love God with both.

Ok, that kind of makes sense, but... How do you love God with your so-called evil inclination, even understanding that the *yetzer hara*, our self-centered drive for what we desire, is necessary to

some extent; as the midrashic text *Bereshit Rabbah* says, without it present we would not build houses, or have children.

I'm going to summarize some attempted answers I've found, see what you think of them. There's the idea that it means you should love God even when your *yetzer hara* has the upper hand of you. Perhaps the most straightforward interpretation. But. Does that mean if you're robbing a bank, you should rob that bank in a spirit of love for God? If you're tearing down a rival or someone you don't like, you should say bad things about them while feeling love for God? I'm going to have to think more about that one.

A more dangerous idea it seems to me is represented by a 13th century Spanish rabbi who suggested that there are times when we could love and serve God with our evil inclination better than we could with our good inclination, such as when we have to confront a separate evil. We might need to fight fire with fire, evil with evil. This does strike me as a very human impulse in reaction to a moral outrage, but I'm afraid we can see some of this in the news these days, and as an expression of love for God, I don't see it.

An amusing interpretation, at least if you're a huge fan of the sitcom *Seinfeld* like I am, I came to somewhat indirectly. The founder of Chabad, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, taught that we can deal with the *yetzer hara* by understanding its tactics and then doing the opposite of what it suggests to us. If we're feeling lazy for instance, understand that it's the *yetzer hara* telling us to be lazy, so get up and do some studying enthusiastically. With this approach, maybe we can love God with our *yetzer hara* by listening to it and then, much like George Costanza in the episode

“The Opposite”, doing the opposite of whatever our instincts seem to be telling us to do.

But the interpretation I think I favor most says that we should learn from our *yetzer hara*, that it has something to teach us that we can apply to loving God. For instance, observe the passion and pride you might naturally feel when pursuing financial gain or earning social status and try to apply those same emotions and intensity to your performance of the *mitzvot*.

Finally, it occurred to me that maybe the concept of *teshuvah*, repentance, could assist here. When we practice *teshuvah* we come closer to God, we are loving God. Without the *yetzer hara*, there would be no need for *teshuvah*, so maybe we can say that the *yetzer hara* in a sense provides us with these opportunities to love God. Thanks?

So that’s five ideas about what it could possibly mean to love God with your evil inclination. If you have any other ideas, let me know!