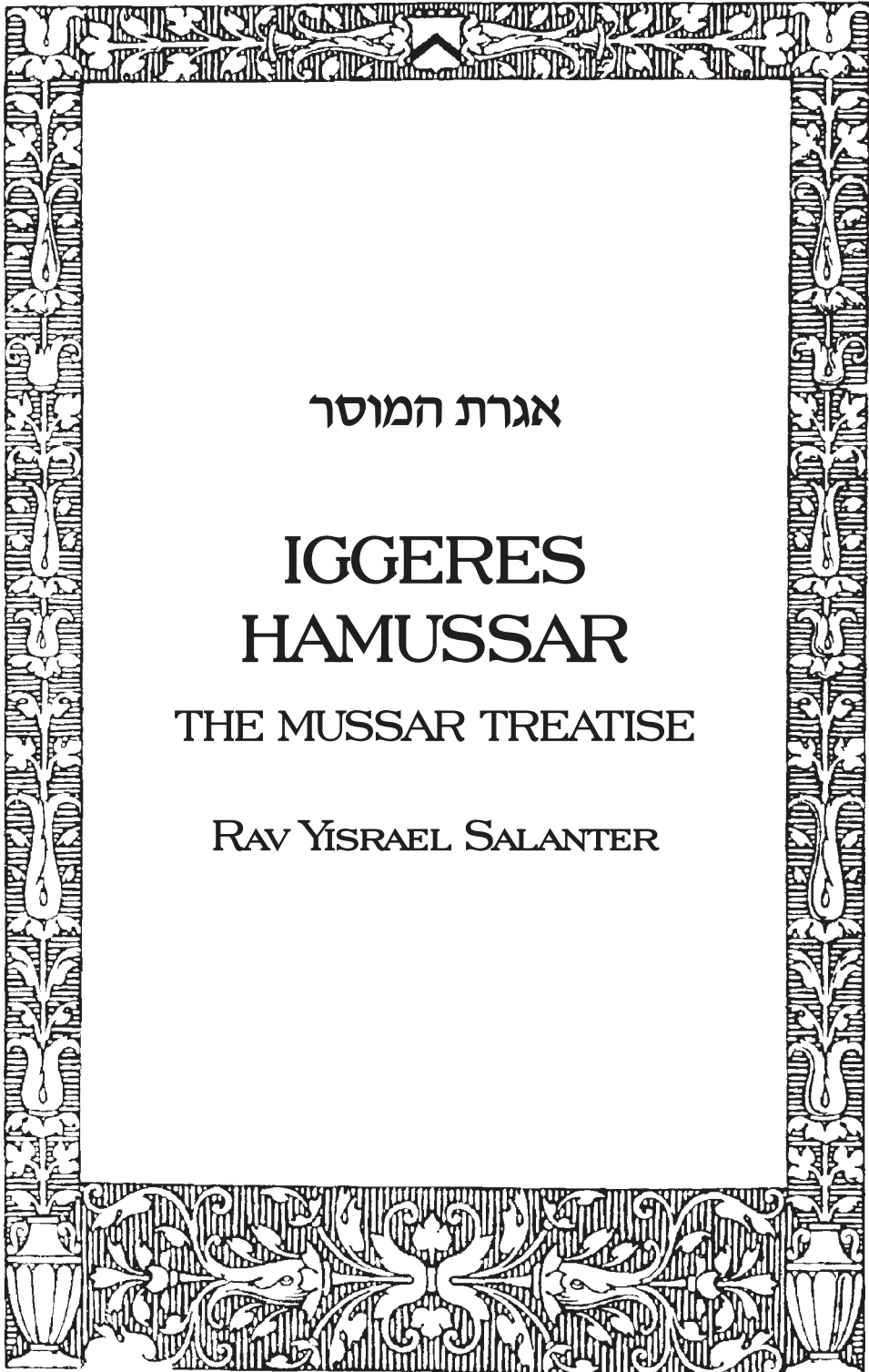




אגרת המוסר

IGGERES
HAMUSSAR

THE MUSSAR TREATISE

RAV YISRAEL SALANTER

THE MUSSAR TREATISE

IGGERES HAMUSSAR

Man is [created to be] free in his imagination and bound by his intellect.¹ His unbridled imagination draws him mischievously in the way of his heart's desire, without fear of the certain future — the time when Hashem will examine all of his affairs. He will be subjected to severe judgment [for any transgressions that he committed]. There is no one else to take his place.² He alone will bear the fruit of his sin;³ the transgressor and the punished are one and the same.⁴ It is very

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- 1 The imagination is not subject to the constraints of truth, whereas the pure intellect operates within the realm of truth. If utilized for the good, the imagination is one of the most vital spiritual powers we have; however, if it is misused it is one of the most dangerous. Rav Yisrael reveals that the primary strategy of the *yetzer hara* to subvert man is through the power of his own imagination. Despite the fact that we know intellectually that Hashem will judge all of our deeds at the time of our demise, our imagination simply overwhelms this awareness. Even though intellectually we have no doubt that we face judgment at the end of our lives, the *yetzer hara* manipulates the free imagination to fantasize that there is no judgment. When the imagination imposes this notion, man is stricken with spiritual blindness: he falsely assumes that he can pursue his heart's desires with no accountability.
 - 2 Even when a person knowingly transgresses the Torah, he instinctually blames others for his misdeed. Indeed, in the first episode of sin in the Torah, Adam HaRishon blames Hashem for giving him Chava, who tempted him to eat of the forbidden fruit. Hence, it is necessary for a person to realize that no one but the perpetrator — i.e., he himself — will be held responsible for his misdeed.
 - 3 Since the entire blame is his, the entire punishment devolves upon him alone.
 - 4 After one's demise, his spirit — his thoughts, feelings, and his complete personality — remains exactly as it was when he was still alive. In other words, death is a bodily death, but his inner being continues to live. Hence, let him entertain no delusions that the entity that will ultimately receive the punishment in the Next World will be different than him

*bitter. Let no man say: This is my illness that I can bear.*⁵

*The calamities of this world are very small compared to the punishments of sin [in the Next World]. The soul of man will be extremely anguished. One day will seem like a year. Woe to us for the imagination, this evil enemy! It is within our hands, within our power, to repel him by giving an attentive ear to the intellect, to grasp the truth and measure the reward [i.e., gratification] of sin against its loss [i.e., punishment]. Yet what can we do? The imagination is an overflowing river, and the intellect will drown unless we place it on a ship. [The ship is] the awakening [of fear of Hashem] in the soul and the great dread [of His punishments] in our spirit.*⁶

THE GENERAL AND THE PARTICULAR

In all matters and things there is the general and the particular. If we do not study the general then we cannot understand the particular. For the particular must have the qualities of the general, yet there can be a general with-

— the deceased — himself. Hence, “the transgressor and the punished are one and the same.” (See Letter Six.)

- 5 Let one not assume that he will be able to endure the punishments like one endures the suffering of an illness in this world. The anguish of most illnesses is tolerable, whereas the punishments for transgressions in the Next World are intolerable.
- 6 The awakening of *yiras Shamayim* is achieved through *hispailus*, i.e., emotional arousal (see Letters Six and Thirty). In its natural state, the heart — which is the emotional core — is sealed, i.e., the knowledge attained by the mind does not penetrate the heart’s barrier. However, the technique of *hispailus* transfers the knowledge of the mind to the inner chambers of the heart. The process of *hispailus* is initiated by consciously stimulating a particular emotion through verbal expression.

For instance, let’s assume that a person chooses to instill the wisdom of *yiras Shamayim* within his heart. By fervently reciting Torah concepts that evoke the fear of Heaven, a subconscious imprint is created. If this stimulation is regularly applied — over time — the impact of the subconscious imprints will aggregate, intensify, and ignite into a live, passionate feeling of *yiras Shamayim*. Once the heart is awakened and electrified — it bolsters, stabilizes, and anchors the intellectual concepts (in this case *yiras Shamayim*) against the false images of the imagination.

Hence, *hispailus* serves to create the boat that protects the intellect from the raging flood waters of the imagination.

out the specific qualities of the particular. Hence, the beginning of everything is the general, and the particulars emanate from this.⁷

Now, let us consider our obligatory service to our Creator, may He be blessed. Should we not consider what is the general, from which the particulars emanate?⁸

THE ALMIGHTY IS THE JUDGE

Without knowledge or contemplation, we can recognize that we are aware of the belief that the Almighty is the Judge, rendering to each man according to his actions. (If a man's ways are bitter and evil, he will be afflicted with severe punishments, either in this world or the Next World, the eternal world — no one can estimate the quality and quantity of this severity. And if his ways are pure and his conduct is straight, he will be blessed with sublime delights in this world and more in the Next World — with wondrous pleasures far beyond our ability to understand and experience.) This [awareness of the awesome Divine judgment and the subsequent reward and punishment] is the beginning step in our service of Hashem, may He be blessed.

This concept is mentioned in the Talmud (*Makkos* 24a): “Chavakuk came and unified the entire Torah into one principle: the *tzaddik* (the righteous man) lives by his faith.⁹ Also Chazal state (*Bava Basra* 78b): “Therefore the rulers say, ‘Come let us make an accounting: the loss of a mitzvah versus its reward, and the reward of a transgression versus its loss.’ ”

MUSSAR AWAKENS HEAVENLY FEAR

Yet, most unfortunately, this general awareness of faith [that Hashem will judge all of our deeds] remains hidden within us, concealed in the depths

7 For instance, in the classification of living things, the term “mammal” refers to animals that nourish their young with milk produced by mammary glands. If not for this definition it would be impossible to identify the particular animals that are in the mammal category. However, once we know the general rule, it is easy to determine which particular creatures are mammals.

8 For if we do not grasp the general principle of the Torah, we will have no understanding of Torah whatsoever — neither the general rule nor its particulars.

9 If he has faith that Hashem will judge all of his deeds, he will fulfill the Torah and thus merit a share in the World to Come.

of our hearts. We are devoid of conscious awareness [of the fear of judgment], unless we devote ourselves to till the soil of our hearts through the expansive thoughts of Mussar. Without making this effort, our general faith [in the coming judgment] does not send its tendrils over the bodily passions, to bind them with the constraint of fear. The particulars of our conduct do not emanate from the general principles of faith, safeguarding us from the most obvious transgressions.¹⁰ We constantly succumb to principal transgressions that reach to the Heavens — endless transgressions of speech, countless unethical business practices, and worst of all, the neglect of Torah study. In short, there is no soundness in any part of our body.

This is especially true in light of the statement of our Sages (*Sukkah* 52a): “The greater the person, the greater the *yetzer hara*.” Thus, we perpetrate grave and consequential transgressions. Yet, because of the darkness in our hearts, we are as the blind — we do not see their enormity. Only if we view them through a magnifying lens — the healthy intellect looking through the lens of the faithful Torah — only then, do we perceive the great overwhelming seriousness of our transgressions. (For instance, even though the size of a star far exceeds the size of the earth, nevertheless it appears to us as a small point of light. Yet when viewed through a telescope, the star appears a bit larger than when viewed with the naked eye. However, in truth, we cannot conceive the true enormity of the star, and so it is [with our transgressions].)

THE SINS THAT CAUSED THE DESTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE

Our Sages, of blessed memory, allude to this (*Yoma* 9b): “Why was the First Temple destroyed? Because of the following three sins that occurred there: idol worship, immorality, and murder. Yet in the period of the Second

¹⁰ Since we lack mastery of the general principle of the Torah — the conscious awareness of the Divine judgment — we cannot possibly fulfill the particulars of the Torah, i.e., the individual mitzvos. Every mitzvah requires conduct that transcends human nature, and without the fear of judgment, it is impossible for a person to perform the mitzvos. For instance, we know that *lashon hara* is a most terrible sin. Yet our natural penchant to speak *lashon hara* urges us to speak *lashon hara* with a drive that can only be extinguished with *yiras Shamayim*.

Temple, they were involved in Torah study, mitzvos, and acts of kindness — so why was it destroyed? As a result of the baseless hatred that was there. Rebbi Yochanan and Rebbi Eliezer both said, ‘Since concerning the First Temple, their transgressions were revealed — their time of redemption was revealed. In the Second Temple, where their sins were not revealed — their time of redemption was not revealed.’ ”

(The concept that the sins of the First Temple period were revealed means that the transgressions were severe and apparent to the eye of the observer. Whereas in the period of the Second Temple, these transgressions could only be detected by an exacting contemplation of their immense severity, and of their ceaseless branching out into more and more transgressions [in every aspect of their lives]).

THE GREATER THE MAN, THE GREATER THE EVIL

The passage (*Yoma* 9b) continues: “The Rabbis asked which was better, the First or Second Temple period? They answered: Look with your own eyes — the First Temple was restored after seventy years, whereas the Second Temple has not yet been rebuilt.” This is an application of the principle that we mentioned above: the greater the person, the greater the *yetzer hara*. Thus, during the Second Temple period, when [the Jewish people] were involved in Torah study, mitzvos, and acts of kindness, their *yetzer hara* was enormous. It caused them to fall into potent transgressions. Those who contemplate the truth know the awful evil of these sins [the root of which was baseless hatred].

THE ALMIGHTY EVALUATES EVERY ACT THAT THE INDIVIDUAL HAS DONE

Now, in every situation in which a man finds himself, what is he to do?¹¹ The day of death is hidden from everybody. It comes suddenly, and the Al-

11 Whether engaged in Torah and mitzvos, or immersed in transgressions, man is spiritually blind if he does not learn Mussar. Without Mussar, he does not recognize his transgressions. If so, how can he prepare himself for the eventual, inescapable judgment?

mighty evaluates every act that the individual has done, as it was recorded in the ledger. Hashem evaluates the days of one's life; not one day is missing. More bitter than death will be his end, with no refuge and no escape. As it says in *Koheles* 9:4, "For he who is attached to all the living has hope, a live dog being better than a dead lion." For as long as a man is alive, he has security and hope that he may direct his heart to repentance, but when he dies, his hope is lost [for he can no longer repent].

A GREAT OBSTACLE BLOCKS THE PATH TO TESHUVAH

This being so, as long as our souls remain within us, we should quickly correct our course to the good. Yet, there is a great obstacle which blocks our path: we do not fear the day of death, even if we mention it with our own mouths. This is stated in Chazal (*Shabbos* 31b): "Perhaps you will say death has been forgotten?" Also, if we see with our eyes the death of people like ourselves, it does not move our souls to repent with our full hearts to our Creator. Yet, ultimately, we will come before Him for judgment, and he will rebuke us for all the evil we have committed. This most common reaction [i.e., indifference and apathy to what will take place after our demise] is just the opposite of what it says in *Koheles* 7:2: "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting — for that is the end of all men, and the living will take it to heart." Our numbness [to the fear of judgment and the necessity to repent before our demise] is due to the multitude of sins that have dulled our hearts — they have become as hard as a stone.

Thus, it is stated in the Talmud (*Yoma* 39a): " 'Do not defile yourselves with them or become defiled through them' (*Vayikra* 11:43). [The Talmud extrapolates:] Do not follow the primary meaning of defiled, rather follow the secondary meaning — dulled." Therefore, our transgressions are also hidden from us,¹² and we do not readily recognize them. As Chazal state (*Kiddushin* 40a): "When a person transgresses and repeats the transgression, it becomes as if it were permitted to him" — these sins will surround him on

12 Not only are we undaunted by the ultimate judgment awaiting us, but we are also blind to our multitude of transgressions.

the Day of Judgment. Our Rabbis, of blessed memory, mention this (*Avodah Zarah* 18a): “The sins that a person casts under his heels surround him on the Day of Judgment.” Alas! Have we lost our hope, God forbid? Is there no remedy for us, Heaven forbid?

THE SOLUTION

Only one thing have we found; it is wisdom and not an art. Let us discuss it a little, and it will benefit us greatly.

THE TWO TYPES OF TRANSGRESSIONS

Let us contemplate with our hearts the nature of transgressions. We will see that there are two categories. One stems from unbridled desire, to love the momentary pleasure without considering the result, even though it will ultimately be bitter. We find an example of this in worldly affairs. The foolish man, and particularly the sick person whose intellect is weakened, loves to gulp down food which is sweet to his palate, and he forgets that this will bring him to a greater deterioration of his health. Therefore our Rabbis, of blessed memory, said in the Talmud (*Tamid* 32a), “Who is the wise man? The one who foresees the future.”

It also says in the Talmud (*Sotah* 3a): “A man does not transgress unless a spirit of foolishness enters within him.” This is the sum total of all his work in his service to the Blessed One — to contemplate the fear of Heaven contained within the fear of punishment. This is accomplished by means of Mussar books and the Aggadic literature of our wise teachers, of blessed memory. These teachings should be internalized to the extent that a person will hear with his ears and almost see before his eyes the great punishments, both quantitative and qualitative. As our Rabbis, of blessed memory, state (*Sanhedrin* 7a): “A judge should always picture a sword between his thighs and Gehinnom open beneath him.” (This visualization assists the judge to be intellectually straight; it also applies to everyone else, to guard oneself from the evil mishap of severe transgressions.) If he will do this and his heart will understand — he will repent, and it will heal him.

THE SPIRIT OF IMPURITY

How great is the evil of man upon the earth! There are none who seek righteousness and none who contemplate the fear of Hashem. No one sets fixed and organized times to toil in understanding the fear of Hashem; to draw up the waters of understanding from the belief [that Hashem will judge all of our deeds] that is hidden and concealed in the inner recesses of his heart; [and still further,] to broaden and fortify this belief; to give it strength and power; and to place the burden on his shoulder to rule over the limbs of his body [i.e., his external conduct] by acting according to the Torah, without overstepping any forbidden boundaries.

This is the second category of transgression,¹³ and there is no example found amongst worldly affairs. On the contrary, in worldly affairs there is no one whose troubles hover over him who does not take the time to consider how to save himself. Desire is not the cause of this type of transgression. For [the cause of] this transgression is a wonder, as it is wondrous that a person does not apply his heart to contemplate the fear of Hashem and the teachings about His punishments. These types of transgressions cannot be from the first category, because desire is not strong enough to cause them. Rather, they are generated from the spirit of impurity that induces man to sin. This is especially true about the transgressions of speech, for what benefit does the speaker derive from doing them?¹⁴

THE DEFINITION OF THE YETZER TOV AND THE YETZER HARA

We can apply these two categories of sin in order to find a compromise between two schools of thought, concerning the definition of the *yetzer hara* and the *yetzer tov*. The first, more common view asserts that the *yetzer hara* is

13 Hence, the first category of transgression stems from pursuing unbridled desire, without considering the bitter consequence of one's deeds. The second category of transgression stems from the spirit of impurity (as will soon be explained), which causes man to avoid active contemplation of *yiras Shamayim* and prevents him from engaging in daily Mussar study.

14 While the transgressions that stem from desire have a "rational" motivation, i.e., self-gratification, the transgressions that stem from the spirit of impurity influence us to engage in conduct and character traits that violate our own values.

the force of impurity in man that induces him to transgress. Whereas the good inclination is the force of holiness in man that inspires him to perform good deeds. The second school of thought asserts that the *yetzer hara* is the force of desire that looks to [get pleasure from] every sweet thing in its time. The power of that passion “brings him within her house and he clings to her in love.”¹⁵ Whereas, the *yetzer tov* is the straight intellect that looks and gazes towards the [inevitable] consequence of our deeds — namely, the trepidation of the fear of Hashem and His exceedingly terrible judgments. And he chooses the advantageous way, to conquer his desire, so that he will be sated with delight and with wondrous pleasure in the World to Come. The glory of this pleasure is beyond description.

EACH PERSON CLINGS TO DIFFERENT TRANSGRESSIONS

We see that the affairs of man constantly vary, each person clinging to different transgressions. There are those whose transgressions are more inclined towards neglect of Torah study than unfaithful business practices and not giving charity, and there are those who are more inclined towards unfaithful business practices and not giving charity than neglect of Torah study. No person is like another when it comes to transgression.

Yet, if the *yetzer hara* were only the force of impurity and not desire, why is everybody not corrupted equally and in the same way,¹⁶ if we do not take into account their supernal roots?¹⁷ However, if we assume that the *yetzer*

15 Rav Yisrael likens a person who succumbs to the temptation of bodily gratification to one who is drawn into the house of a harlot and is unable to remove himself from her enticement.

16 If the *yetzer hara* is the spirit of impurity, it will affect everybody with the same spiritual ailments, just as a disease affects each person with the same disorders and symptoms.

17 Rav Yisrael here brings proofs that support both schools of thought concerning what is the *yezer hara* — i.e., the spirit of impurity or the power of desire. First, he proposes that since each person is drawn after different sins, the *yetzer hara* must be the power of desire. This proof is based on the following process of elimination: The spirit of impurity is manifest the same within each person. Therefore, the fact that each person is drawn after a different sin indicates that the *yetzer hara* is the power of desire and not the spirit of impurity.

However, this is only true if we do not consider the effects of the supernal roots — the innate personality drives. In other words, even though the spirit of impurity on its

hara is also the power of desire, then we can explain the vast range of human behavior. Since the desires of man are dependent upon his temperament (his birthplace, constitution, time, and affairs), each person's transgressions vary according to the unique elements of his life.

Yet even this vast range of temperaments and desires cannot explain the phenomena of human conduct. Don't we see with our own eyes people committing transgressions that actually oppose their natural desire? For example, everybody acknowledges that self-aggrandizement is repulsive, yet a person will abuse his own value system in the pursuit of self-aggrandizement. This conflict in personality is caused by the impurity of spirit [and not by desire].

We now understand that the *yetzer hara* is both the power of desire as well as the impurity of spirit. Likewise, the good inclination is the healthy intellect that sees the results of a person's deeds, as well as the holiness of spirit within man.

THE PRESERVATION OF THE SOUL WITHIN THE BODY

Behold! The two aspects of man, the physical and the spiritual, are in accordance with the two components of man's creation — his body and soul. The bodily aspects are apparent to the physical eye, whereas the aspects of the soul are known only from the functioning of the body.¹⁸ The strategies and designs to maintain the soul within the body are focused exclusively on the body. This is accomplished through a wholesome diet and protection

own is manifest in consistent, universal symptoms — the combination of the spirit of impurity plus the supernal roots could engender variations in the effects of the spirit of impurity. However, Rav Yisrael is isolating the two definitions of the *yetzer hara* and is not considering the effects of the supernal roots.

Subsequently, Rav Yisrael brings a different proof that the spirit of impurity does affect human conduct, for people often behave in ways that violate their own value systems. Such behavior is an indication of the influence of the spirit of impurity. Therefore, Rav Yisrael concludes that the *yetzer hara* is both the spirit of impurity, as well as the powers of desire.

¹⁸ Since the soul is composed of a spiritual element, it cannot be seen by the physical eye. However, evidence of the soul can be perceived by the functions of the body, i.e., the movement of the limbs, the perception of the senses, the cognitive ability of the mind, the emotions of the heart, the countenance of the face, etc.

from danger. In this way [through addressing the needs of the body] the soul is preserved within the body. On the other hand, the preservation of the soul within the body is not naturally accomplished by procedures that nurture the soul; for the soul is neither seen nor experienced independently of the body. (However, on the spiritual plane, in truth, the essential preservation of the soul within the body is dependent exclusively on the soul — according to the level of one's Divine service.)

THE PRIMARY SPIRITUAL DEVICE

Likewise, in the service of the Eternal, may His name be blessed, the primary spiritual device — to empower the *yetzer tov* with both the force of holiness and the clarity of intellect, and to repel the *yetzer hara* and diminish its forces of impurity and desire — is dependent upon the corporeal aspects. That is to say, this is also accomplished by nourishing the body with “good foods”: the contemplation of fear of Hashem and Mussar, which emanate from the pure Torah.

IYOV

This concept is taught by our Rabbis, of blessed memory (*Bava Basra* 16a): “Iyov endeavored to exempt all of mankind from judgment. He spoke before the Eternal: ‘Master of the Universe! You created the ox with cloven hoof, and You created the donkey with uncloven hoof. You created Gan Eden, and You created Gehinnom. You created righteous people, and You created evil people. Who can overcome Your power?’ Iyov’s friends answered him, ‘You have denied fear of the Eternal One and you have diminished the power of prayer.’ ” *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* created the *yetzer hara* as well as its remedy, the Torah.

THE PHYSICAL REMEDY OF THE TORAH

Based on this encounter, our Sages, of blessed memory, taught us that the remedy of the Torah is the fear that emanates from it. This is derived from the words, “You have denied fear of the Eternal...” This refers to the physical aspect of fear, which is viscerally perceptible. Thus, the healing rem-

edy for all the ills of the soul is for man to focus his heart and soul on the fear of punishment that is taught in the Torah. Whether in general: to know and understand from the Torah that corresponding to each transgression there is a devastating and awesome punishment, and corresponding to each mitzvah there is a reward of unimaginable elevation. Or in particular — and this is the prime factor — to study the laws of Torah that pertain to each transgression. For instance, for arrogance [one should study] the sections of the Torah germane to arrogance; for unethical business practices, the sections of the Torah that treat the ethics of business affairs; and so, too, for each mitzvah and each transgression, [one should study] its appropriate Torah teachings.

THE HEALING POWER OF HALACHAH STUDY

The handle and prime element in the utilization of the healing powers of the Torah to cure the disease of the *yetzer hara* is the intense, concentrated, and deep study of the laws of the particular transgression.¹⁹ Man naturally refrains from many transgressions, and he will not submit to them even under pressure or duress. On the other hand, there are more stringent transgressions which one will easily commit. For instance, a great portion of our brethren, the Children of Israel, will not eat bread without washing their hands even at a time of great hunger and distress. However, concerning the more serious sin of slander, they will easily transgress — even without the strong drive of desire normally associated with transgression.

THE PREREQUISITE TO TRANSFORM ONE'S NATURE

We see [from the above example] that it is essential, in order to guard oneself from transgression, to persist in good conduct until this good conduct becomes second nature. Therefore, even if one sincerely strives to walk on the paths of Mussar, to dedicate himself with all his feelings and thoughts to

¹⁹ Although in general, the study of *yiras Shamayim* and Mussar is the cure for spiritual illness, Rav Yisrael reveals here that the primary transformative technique is centered on focused study of the particular attribute at hand. Therefore, change in human nature is rendered by the deep and concentrated study of the trait that needs to be corrected or strengthened.

refrain from speaking slander — even so, he is likely to fail. As long as he has not transformed his nature and his habits of conduct to the extent that he has no natural tendency to speak slanderously, he will still succumb more easily to slander than to eating without washing of the hands. This is the pattern in all types of transgression, each one in accordance with the individual, his time, and his place. Each place varies according to its situation. Every district has certain transgressions which the community easily refrains from and naturally avoids.

We know that the transformation of nature is generated by study and consistency of habit. Therefore, the main principal and the strong pillar to prepare oneself to guard against transgression and to perform mitzvos is the study of the law germane to that transgression or mitzvah. This study must be pursued in great depth and detail. This method of study affects a strong acquisition within the soul; one's character will gradually change so that the transgression is naturally distant from him.

THE PROCLIVITY TO OBSERVE KASHRUS

For an illustration, in our district, praise to the Almighty, the injunction to abstain from non-kosher meat is naturally implanted within the souls of Israel. So strong is this proclivity that no one has to force his nature and desire to abstain from non-kosher meat — it is foreign to him. There is no kosher butcher who would not consult a competent, halachic authority concerning the status of any questionable meat. Even if his inquiry would cause him a significant loss, the fear of Hashem is within him — in his nature and in his ways. This generates the attitude: “God forbid that I should do evil and deceive my fellow Jews.”

THE MULTITUDE OF SINFUL BUSINESS DEALINGS

However, in the multitude of our sinful business dealings, we find just the opposite. Most people do not seek advice concerning a suspicion of stealing from their fellow. Oftentimes they oppress victims, even before legal claims are fairly evaluated. Some people, even after legal decisions are made, execute deceptive or strong-arm tactics. Doesn't the Torah view all these

things equally? All of them are classified as transgressions, according to the Torah and its judgments. Thus, whether concerning [the Torah injunctions pertaining to non-kosher meat] like: “You shall not eat of the flesh of an animal torn in the field” (*Shemos* 22:30) and “You shall not eat any carcass” (*Devarim* 14:21), or [the Torah injunctions pertaining to monetary rulings] like: “You shall not oppress your fellow and you shall not steal” (*Vayikra* 19:13) — all of these are equally transgressions of the Torah [and must be stringently observed].

It is naturally ingrained in the soul of Israel that all non-kosher meat is forbidden to him; whatever meat is declared non-kosher by a halachic authority — he will distance himself from it and conduct himself only according to the Torah. So, too, in money matters — whatever the Torah classifies as belonging to one’s fellow, if someone else besides the owner has it, this is stealing, and he transgresses “you shall not steal.” We see, in the multitude of our transgressions, that even the scholars, as well as nearly the God-fearing people, are not careful to refrain from this sin. And, yet, so serious is this transgression that Yom Kippur, and even death, do not grant atonement.

Yet, if a man will direct his heart and soul to learn in-depth the laws germane to business matters from the Talmud and the halachic authorities — each person according to his ability — a character transformation will take place. If the focus of his study is to internalize the knowledge of the forbidden and the permitted, then his study will be particularly effective to guard him from stealing. Even if at first he is unable to desist from all infringements of stealing, he should not despair — for this is due to the strong desire to steal, as well as the prevalent practices of society. He should know with certainty how great is the power of Mussar, that slowly a vast acquisition of knowledge and new habits will take root in his soul. Eventually, questions concerning kashrus and questions concerning stealing will be equally important in his eyes.

TESHUVAH FOR TRANSGRESSIONS NOT GENERALLY COMMITTED

Even if a man has fallen to transgressions that are not generally committed, like adultery and the like — as the Talmud (*Bava Basra* 165a) says: “The

majority of people fall to the sin of stealing, the minority fall to the sin of adultery, and all of them fall to the sin of slander” — appropriate study will change him. If the *yetzer hara* has so overcome him that he considered the sin permitted, may Hashem have mercy — the essential remedy (besides the contemplation of the fear of Heaven and Mussar from the *aggados*, the midrashim of Chazal, and the Mussar books that are relevant [to the particular transgression at hand]) is the deep study of the relevant laws, with intention to fulfill them. This will slowly bear fruits to empower his soul to be on guard against descending to Gehinnom; or at least, he will not brazenly commit the sin.

FOOTNOTE OF RAV YISRAEL: At first, let him fulfill the aspect of the precept that is not in conflict with his *yetzer hara*. The Talmud (*Chullin* 4a) refers to this incremental approach in the case of *mumar lete'avon* (an apostate who violates Torah injunctions, not out of rebellion, but in order to satisfy his appetite): “The leavened bread of transgressors (those who kept leavened bread in their domain during Pesach) is permitted [to be eaten] immediately after Pesach, because they exchange it [after Pesach for non-Jewish bread].” Rashi explains that we assume he exchanged the forbidden bread with permitted bread in order to lighten the sin. And we relay on this [assumption], that he definitely [exchanged the forbidden bread with permitted bread].²⁰

When we contrast the religious level of the early generations with our generation — how can we not be embarrassed and mortified? In the times of the Talmud, it was second nature for a *mumar* who kept bread in his house during Pesach to lessen the

20 According to halachah, all leaven must be destroyed before Pesach. Any leaven that is allowed to remain in the domain of a Jew is forbidden to eat even after Pesach. However, all leaven found in the house of a *mumar lete'avon* is permitted after Pesach. Even though he violated the precept to remove all leaven from his house before Pesach, this sin stemmed from desire, not from rebellion. Therefore, we can assume that after Pesach he will exchange the forbidden bread for permitted non-Jewish bread in order to limit his sin. For we assume that when the precept is not in conflict with his *yetzer hara*, he will certainly comply with the Divine will.

culpability of his sin by complying with the aspects of halachah that did not conflict with his cravings. Whereas, our generation, in the multitude of our sins, fall into the status of *mumar lehachis* [an apostate who violates the Torah out of defiance and rebellion]. For we make no attempt to lessen the degree of culpability concerning the sins that we commit on a habitual basis. Hence, our corruption is tantamount to *mumar lehachis*, may Hashem show us mercy.

We see that the halachic ruling is different in our day than in the time of the Talmud. The *Shulchan Aruch* (*Yoreh De'ah* 2:2) rules: "A *mumar* who lustfully eats non-kosher meat yet knows the laws of *shechitah* (ritual slaughter of animals) [is allowed to *shecht* an animal *only* if his knife was checked beforehand for proper halachic sharpness]."²¹ Moreover, it appears that in our day, we are not permitted to partake of *any* food from a person who we suspect lustfully eats non-kosher meat. We must suspect that in all cases he has subverted the holiness of the food. (Meaning, that he is suspect of violating halachah even in matters where he is *not* lustful. Whereas, in the earlier generations, only food that he lustfully ate in violation of the Torah was forbidden to others.) How much more so is it now forbidden to give him a pre-checked kosher knife with which to *shecht*, and eat of his *shechitah* (although this was permitted in the time of the Talmud). One who does this is considered a *mumar* of the entire Torah.

Ultimately, he will gain strength and resolve through much study of the relevant laws associated with the accustomed transgression. Eventually this will help him acquire a different nature, and the notion to transgress will not arise in his heart, even if the situation is difficult.

21 In other words, even though he could perform a kosher *shechitah* with a kosher knife — without conflict with his desire — we do not trust him. Since we are not allowed to rely on his word that the knife was kosher, the halachah requires that we check the knife ourselves.

THE SPIRITUAL REMEDY OF THE TORAH

Amongst the Torah's remedies for the *yetzer hara*, there is also a spiritual aspect of healing. As it says in Chazal (*Sotah* 21a): "All the time that a person studies Torah, the Torah saves him." It makes no difference which subject he is learning. If he is studying the laws of property damage — it will save him from speaking slander. Even if the Torah topic he is perusing does not pertain to the transgression, the spirituality of the Torah will protect him.

THE CENTRAL STRATEGY FOR THE CURE FOR THE YETZER HARA

If we look with a penetrating eye, we see that the central strategy for the cure for the *yetzer hara* lies within the physical aspect — the contemplation of the fear of Hashem and the study of the appropriate laws. The other remedy, the spiritual aspect, comes in only subsequently; it is, therefore, classified as a secondary cure. The mitzvah to study Torah is separate and independent of our current discussion, and the parameters of obligation in this mitzvah are delineated in the laws of Torah study. The degree to which the *yetzer hara* is overwhelming does not change how much Torah a person is obligated to learn. Rather, one needs to fulfill his obligation of Torah study, regardless of the condition of the *yetzer hara*. Furthermore, it may not be within his power to learn more than his requirement. Hence, when he properly fulfills his mitzvah of Torah study, at least the spiritual remedy for the *yetzer hara* will accordingly be extended to him.

THE CURE IS BASED ON THE SEVERITY OF THE ILLNESS

However, the physical aspect — the contemplation of the fear of Hashem and the study of the relevant laws — is a primary remedy. A person needs to conduct himself with regard to this primary remedy in the same manner as he does with the healing of bodily disease. That is to say, the severity of the illness is proportionate to the strength of the remedy — in quality and quantity. Likewise, in disease of the soul, the cure is based on the severity of the illness. As long as this *yetzer hara* is attacking him, so is there a demand

to increase contemplation of the fear of Hashem and the study of the appropriate laws. If man does not use this physical remedy, then also the spiritual remedy, the study of Torah, will not render much influence over the illness of the *yetzer hara*. This is comparable to the health of man, in that the spiritual function — the soul — is sustained by the corporeal functions.

A HEART OF STONE

The enemy that ambushes man is the *yetzer hara*. It works on him to turn his heart to stone. Man is rendered so blind that he does not sense his awful transgressions, nor his shortcomings. Hence, he does not endeavor to save himself. He does not contemplate the fear of Hashem to seek an effective remedy — the physical aspect of healing.

A MAN SHOULD INFLUENCE OTHERS TO STUDY MUSSAR

In order to heal himself, then, a man should direct his heart to bring merit to the public by arousing them to contemplate the fear of Hashem and Mussar.²² It is human nature to observe other people's shortcomings and recognize that they need much Mussar. Thus, he should strengthen himself with all of his power to inspire the public study of Mussar. When many people will be helped and the fear of Hashem will be increased, then the merit of many will be dependent on him. Consequently, ever so slowly, the study of Mussar will guide him on the path of righteousness. Thus, his public teaching of Mussar will be a physical, as well as a spiritual, healing to him. As taught by Chazal (*Yoma* 87a), "Everyone who brings merit to the public — no sin will come to his hand."

²² Although Rav Yisrael has eloquently proven that Mussar study is crucial and indispensable for our spiritual success and welfare, nevertheless, he also realizes that the *yetzer hara* will not allow us to devote ourselves to Mussar with our full hearts. By dampening the required intensity of Mussar pursuit, the *yetzer hara* impedes *yiras Shamayim* from awakening within our hearts. Therefore, in order to counter the machinations of the *yetzer hara*, Rav Yisrael devised a brilliant strategy. Essentially, his plan calls for all those committed to Mussar and *yiras Shamayim* to dedicate themselves to strengthen others in Mussar and *yiras Shamayim*. See Letters One and Two for further elaboration.

NO GREATER MERCY

How exceedingly great should this mitzvah be in the eyes of man! He should dedicate his heart and soul to guide people to study Mussar — to save their souls from Gehinnom. It says in the Talmud (*Shabbos* 151b), “All who have mercy on the creations, Heaven will have mercy on them.” There is no greater mercy than to remind and inspire people to study the fear of Hashem. Then, their eyes will see, and their ears will hear, and their heart will understand the great stumbling block before them. They will sigh about the time of judgment. Then they will return to Hashem, may He be blessed, so that they will “depart from evil and do good.”

The man that is inspired to do this will share a goodly portion in everything that is generated from his efforts. He will delight in the eternal delights — which no physical eye has ever seen. It is beyond human understanding to fathom and perceive the quantity and quality of the reward of this mitzvah. The effort is relatively small and the reward is great — beyond all our ability to value and measure. Every man should put his eye and the power of his intellect to this great thing — if he is a *ba'al nefesh* [a master of his soul]!