

Shmuel Reichman Inspiration- Think. Feel. Grow.

Straightening the Bent Path: The Secret Behind Potential

Parshas Bo

A Weekly Dvar Torah on the Parsha



1. Two Wolves

An old man sat with his grandson by the campfire, staring into the dancing flames. With a sparkle in his eye the old man looked at the young boy and began telling him a story. "There is a fight going on inside of me between two wolves. One is evil—he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. "The other is good – he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you—and inside every other person, too." The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather: "Which wolf will win?" The old man fell silent, then replied, "The one you feed." While this story might give you the chills, it also connects to a very important idea developed in this week's parsha.

2. The Match: Good or Evil?

There is a deep principle in Jewish thought that the most fundamental aspects of Torah are expressed in the most deceptively simple manner. Our job is to delve into



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them, and see the inner depth behind it. There is probably no single object in the Torah which is more overlooked than Moshe's match-his staff. It plays such a pivotal role in the story of Yetzias Mitzrayim, and yet, how often do we ponder or talk about its nature? The match first appears at the sneh- the burning bush- and turns into a snake. Once again, at Pharaoh's court, the match turns into a snake. In Jewish thought, the snake represents the yetser harah, evil, so it would appear as if the match represents evil. Yet, the match is also used to perform all the makkos in Mitzrayim (Shemos 4:17), as well as kriyas yam suf- the pinnacle of the Jews' miraculous and transcendent experience. Furthermore, the midrash explains that Hashem's name was crystalized into the match itself. It therefore appears that the Match is a very spiritual object, the exact opposite of the evil it seems to represent? So which is it?

3. *Everything is Potential*

In order to understand this, we must first develop a fundamental principle. Nothing in the physical world is objectively good or evil. Rather everything has the potential to be used for either good or evil. The choice is solely up to you! Electricity is neither good nor bad. An outlet can be used to charge your appliances, but it can also give you an electric shock. The same applies to money: it can be used to enable Torah learning, but it can also be used to fund destruction and chaos. A charismatic personality can be used to inspire others to grow or to seduce them down the wrong path. Everything in this world is merely potential, waiting to be used. Evil, therefore, is really the misuse of potential, when we choose to use an object for something other than its true purpose. Evil is the breakdown and corruption of good. This is why the Hebrew word for evil is rah, which means brokenness or fragmentation. The reason why Hashem created the world in such a way is so that we can have free will. We get to choose whether to use things for their true purpose, actualizing their potential, or to misuse them, getting pulled into the clutches of evil.

4. *The Highest Yearning, the Lowest Desire*

The Gemara (Yoma 69b) gives an intriguing illustration of this principle. The gemara describes the historic transition where prophecy ended. When the Anshei Kineses Ha'Gedolah tried to abolish the yetzer harah for avodah zarah (idol worship), the yetzer harah came flaming out of the Kodosh Ha'kedoshim- the holy of holies! Why would the source of evil and corruption come from the highest and most transcendent place? We would expect it to emerge from underground, or erupt from a volcano! We

can understand this peculiar location based on the very idea we just developed. The root of evil is deeply connected to good. Evil is simply the misuse of the same energy that could, and should, be used for good. The evil desire for avodah zarah is a corruption of the spiritual desire to transcend and connect with Hashem. When correctly manifested, this desire is used for nevuah (prophecy)- a deep experiential oneness with Hashem, the source of everything. When corrupted and used for avodah zarah, we take that same desire to transcend, but fail to trace ourselves back to the root source, Hashem Himself. [Why the Anshe Kineses Ha'gedolah felt the need to destroy our desire for avodah zarah, which also caused the end of nevuah, requires a much longer discussion.]

5. The More Power, the More Potential

Having established that everything has the potential to be used for good or evil, it's also important to realize that the more power there is, the more potential there is. For example, a 220 watt outlet can either charge your phone or give you a small electric shock you. But 20,000 watts can either light up your neighborhood or electrocute you. The more power, the more potential. Of course, this results in an important principle: the value in any power is only in as much as it can be controlled. Otherwise, the more power you have, the more destruction you will have, as we often see with nuclear energy and money. Just think about giving a child the power to cross the street by himself. When do you give him such a power? Only when he has the ability to control it, to know when not to cross the street.

6. The Mateh: Potential for Good or Evil

Now we can begin to understand the Mateh. It is neither good nor evil. What it will be is solely up to the one who holds it. It represents the nachash, the snake of evil, but it also represents Hashem and spirituality. When in the form of evil, it causes Moshe to run away in abject terror, but when in the form of good it causes the world to witness the miracles of Hashem. Yet, we can develop this theme even further.

7. The Bent Path and the Straight Path

The midrash compares Mitzrayim and the nachash to a "bent path", while the mateh is a straight path. What do the concepts of bent and straight paths refer to?

Imagine you are walking down a path. Whenever you turn around, you can see where you came from. What if the path suddenly bends and takes a sharp turn? When you turn around, you can no longer see the origins of your journey. The same is true of the physical world we live in. Originally, the physical world loyally and perfectly reflected its spiritual root. When you looked around, you saw and experienced Hashem, and knew that He created the world; it was like looking back down a straight path. However, after Adam sinned, the entire world fell. The world became a bent path, whereby we can no longer see where we came from.

The nachash bends and slithers, representing a bent path, a world of evil and brokenness, where you can no longer see Hashem. The mateh represents a straight path, where you learn to trace yourself back to your source.

When Moshe first encounters Hashem, he is told to thrust the mateh to the ground, where it then transforms into a snake. When something is thrust to the ground, low and distant from its transcendent source, and misused, it becomes bent, it becomes evil. But when Moshe lifted it up, towards the sky, tracing it back to its source, straightening the bent path, it became a mateh, it became good.

8. Explaining Moshe's Showdown With Pharaoh

We can use this deep explanation of the bent and straight path to understand Moshe and Aharon's showdown with Pharaoh. The midrash explains that when Moshe and Aharon turned their mateh into a snake in front of Pharaoh, he laughed. Not only did he proceed to do this himself, but he then brought his magicians to do it, and even brought his wife to do it. To really prove his point, he proceeded to bring the schoolchildren to do this as well. Laughing at Moshe, he exclaims: "One who has goods to sell should take them to a market which is short on supply. You've brought your goods to an overstocked market". In other words, we are not impressed. Moshe responds, "One who has the top-quality produce takes it to a well-stocked market, where the dealers are experts and will recognize the superior quality of the goods". On that note, Aharon's mateh swallows all the other snakes, once it already turned back into a mateh. The deep explanation behind this cryptic scene is not just that Moshe overcame Pharaoh and Mitzrayim. Remember, the midrash explained that the snake and Mitzrayim represent the bent path. The mateh represents the straight path. It doesn't say that Moshe and Aharon's snake swallowed Pharaoh's snakes, it says that their mateh swallowed their snakes! Meaning, the straight path overcame the bent path, good overcame evil.

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9. The Secret of Tzitzis

The principle of the straight and bent path is also the secret behind Tzitzis. Tzitzis are only required on a cornered garment. It is only when the garment ends, and begins to bend, that are obligated to put tzitzis on those corners. The straight lines of the tzitzis straighten the bent path of the garment. Thus, the tzitzis represent our ability to source ourselves back to Hashem, even on a bent path. The different details of tzitzis beautifully reflect this idea. We wear ticheiles, strings dyed a beautiful ocean blue color, to trace ourselves back to sea, then to the heavens, then to the kisei ha'kavod (Hashem's throne), and ultimately to Hashem Himself. The gematria of tzitzis is 600, and when you add the eight strings and the five knots you get 613, corresponding to the 613 mitzvos we use to connect ourselves to Hashem. [Food for thought: the mitzvah of mezuzah (which lies bent on the doorpost) and the copper snake on the mateh in the midbar which overcame the plague also connect to this topic, but are beyond the scope of this article.]

10. Straightening the Bent Path

Everything in our world is potential that can be used for good or evil. The choice is yours. Just like those two wolves living inside of us, you get to choose which one you feed. The pull and temptation of desire can be overwhelming, but the beauty and oneness of truth must overcome, persevere, and prevail. We each get to choose who we become. Let's be inspired to straighten the bent path, build clarity from confusion, oneness from brokenness, and bring the world to its ultimate destination!