

The Positive Approach¹

Fighting the Good Fight. Forever!	1
Boxers in the Theatre of Your Mind	3
Worlds gained in an instant	5

Fighting the Good Fight. Forever!²

“Not fair!”

It is the battle cry of every child. But as we grow older we discover that life is not always fair. Some people just have it easier than others. And as we mature we learn to live with that reality.

The Baal HaTanya tells us that the same applies to *ruchniyus*. There are some people who do not have the same constant struggle as others do. Their inclination is to do what is right and they do not have the same *nisyonos* as the rest of us. He refers to such individuals as “tzaddikim.” But they were not just born that way. Rather, they have successfully vanquished their *yetzer hara*. Normal people, who struggle with their *ruchniyus*, who have constant difficult tests, are “beinonim,” the average ones.

If the *yetzer hara* surrenders and gives up the fight, you are a tzaddik; if he comes back for another round, you’re a beinoni.

But do not think of a beinoni as a second class citizen.

The Gemara tells us that the Amora, Rabbah, deemed himself a beinoni — this, despite the fact that he never stopped learning, so much so that the *Malach HaMaves* (Angel of Death) could not get to him when his time came. [Tanya explains that Rabbah considered himself a beinoni because he suspected that his *yetzer hara* has not been vanquished, it has only been temporarily put to sleep.]

The Tanya continues:

The beinoni should not get frustrated with the continuous battling, but instead, he should celebrate his victories.

¹ The following articles are based on ideas found in Tanya Ch. 27. For more sources on this topic see http://wiki.guardyoureyes.com/Positive_Attitude.

² Reprinted from Positive Vision, ArtScroll Mesorah Publications, p. 269

For when the verse states, **וְלֹא תִתּוּרוּ אַחֲרֵי לְבַבְכֶם וְאַחֲרֵי עֵינֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר אֲתֶם זֹנִים אַחֲרֵיהֶם**, "Do not follow your hearts and eyes that lead you astray", who is it speaking to?

It speaks to one whose heart and eyes lead him astray and who is inclined to keep looking after inadvertently seeing. It is enjoining him to refrain from following this challenge. The verse is not even addressing the tzaddik.

When a beinoni who is confronted with a nisayon overcomes that challenge, he earns great reward, as the Gemara teaches,³ If one sits and does not perform a transgression, Heaven grants his reward as one who has actively performed a mitzvah.

Certainly, this statement does not refer to the tzaddik; it refers rather to the normal person who struggles with his yetzer and nevertheless does not succumb.

Tanya thus writes:

"Do not be upset if you spend even your entire life doing battle, for perhaps you were created for this very purpose; this is your fate, to constantly struggle with and subdue the powers of Evil. For there are two ways of giving nachas to Hashem: one, that of the tzaddik who successfully vanquishes his yetzer hara and 'turns the bitter into sweet'; and the other, of the beinoni, who is in a never-ending war and continuously battles his strong yetzer hara and subjugates it."

He reads the struggles of the beinoni into a verse, that also holds out promise:

וְהִתְקַדְּשִׁתֶּם וְהִיִּיתֶם קְדוֹשִׁים.

Make yourself as if you are holy — fight and act as one who is, in fact, holy and separated from animal instincts — and then you will indeed become holy.

He concludes:

"Ultimately, Hashem will expel the inclination from your heart. Hashem will reward your effort and make your battle easier."⁴

³ ישב ולא עבר עבירה - נותנים לו שכר כעושה מצוה (קידושין לט, ב).

⁴ Tanya Ch. 27.

Boxers in the Theatre of Your Mind⁵

One is most likely to be aware of his failings in kedushah when he wishes to *daven*. He feels like a fraud trying to visualize himself speaking to Hashem when his imagination was recently occupied with tumah.

Surprisingly, however, the Baal HaTanya adds that in certain cases the sudden appearance of an improper image or thought is not cause for concern but rather cause for celebration.

How so?

He explains it this way: Picture two people engaged in a sports competition, say boxing or racing. As long as one is not going all out, his adversary will likewise pace himself and hold back. But as soon as one chooses to let loose and go full throttle, his opponent will respond in kind and fight back with every ounce of his strength.

The Baal HaTanya explains that when one is about to daven, his spiritual self (which he refers to as the “nefesh Elokis”) intensifies and concentrates on standing before Hashem in prayer. At this point his physical self (the “nefesh habehamis”) senses the “threat” to its mission and leaps into action to fight.

It does so by introducing improper thoughts into the person’s mind. Many people assume that the appearance of such thoughts just as they are about to daven proves the worthlessness of their prayers. [“If I would daven properly these images would never arise!”] If that is your thought process, the yetzer hara has you right where he wants you — feeling bewildered and cheap.

In fact, this logic is flawed.

Such thinking would make sense, explains the Baal HaTanya, if a person would be comprised of one nefesh only. The sudden introduction of tumah when you’re about to daven would indeed indicate that your commitment is lacking. But a person is not composed of one nefesh only; each of us must deal with two distinct motivators, one good and one bad.

There is a constant war raging within each of us as to who will take control — or to be more precise, whom we will allow to take control. When we decide to learn Torah or think about fearing Hashem we have empowered our spiritual self; when we think improper thoughts, we have ceded control to our base impulses.

When one wishes to daven, his mind thus becomes a battleground between these two opposing forces, with each vying for control. The yetzer hara realizes that its adversary is about to wrest control and is trying desperately to stop it, so it sends images and thoughts into one’s mind to interfere. The sudden and unexpected appearance of improper thoughts as one is about to daven in fact demonstrates the potential for growth. These thoughts have entered one’s mind for this very reason. (Tanya Ch. 28).

⁵ Reprinted from Positive Vision, ArtScroll Mesorah Publications, p. 269.

In practice, how should one deal with such thoughts?

Envision the following scenario: You are involved in some constructive task when a deranged homeless fellow walks in, ranting angrily and demanding your attention. [Anyone who regularly “enjoys” the New York City subway system need not stretch his imagination too far to visualize this.] How would you react?

You would ignore the individual and simply walk away. There is no point grappling with a madman. If you wrestle with a filthy person, you’ll end up filthy yourself.

Says the Tanya: When an improper thought enters your mind, don’t let it bother you. Don’t dwell upon it, just ignore it. Don’t allow it to get your attention at all. Distracting oneself (hesech hadaas) is a very effective tool in the battle for maintaining kedushah

But primarily, the Tanya is telling us not to get dejected.

The fact that you are struggling does not mean you are bad. In fact, it may indicate that because there is great opportunity for growth the yetzer hara is fighting harder. Fight back.

Worlds gained in an instant⁶

The Baal Hatanya is an excellent source on this issue of purity of thought. "It's no disgrace," he writes, "to have such thoughts pushing their way in and trying to steal the limelight." On the contrary, it's an opportunity granted us to firmly eject them, thereby avoiding the Torah prohibition (Bamidbar 15:39), "Do not stray after your heart and your eyes."

"Not every mitzvah calls for an action. Here is a case of a passive mitzvah, and every time we try to switch to a more kosher line of thought it earns us rewards equal to a *mitzvas a'sei*. When we refuse to yield to unwanted images tugging at our mind's eye, we have reason to feel elevated and even joyous, equal to the *simcha shel mitzvah* when performing the mitzvah of sukkah and *lulav*. But, you protest, how can I rejoice considering how low I must be if such dishonourable thoughts keep entering my mind?"

Here the Baal Hatanya (Lekutei Amorim ch. 23 and 28), with one stroke of his masterful pen, swings our mood around one hundred and eighty degrees. He makes us feel not battered but flattered. He tells of how there are two types of *nachas ruach* (delight) before Hashem. The first type is that of the extremely righteous who vanquish the evil elements inside them forever. The second type is the average man who constantly battles against the appealing impurities all around. His task is to keep on shoving away impure thoughts coming from the heart and proceeding towards the mind. This causes tremendous effects in the heavenly realms.

Shall we try to imagine what transpires in shamayim when a Yid finds unholy thoughts and sensations rising inside him and dutifully quells them at once? The words of the Zohar (Parshas Terumah) give us a keyhole glimpse which reveals how the *sitra achra* (source of all evil) is firmly settled on his perch like a mighty eagle - a bleak prospect indeed. Who is able to unseat this towering menace?

Suddenly, an act performed on earth is reported: A *malach* announces, "So-and-so has just controlled his thoughts and quietly denied himself a 'minor' indulgence. In defiance of today's decidedly casual, fun-loving society, he chose to crown Hashem as Melech over himself - his body and his soul!"

Immediately, the *sitra achra's* power is weakened, for we have a principle that overcoming our *sitra achra* in This World correspondingly unseats the mighty *sitra achra* in the upper spiritual worlds. He is demoted and a sublime light spreads all across the heavens. The light of this one "small" deed radiates up to the furthestmost celestial spheres.

As for our unsung hero below, Chazal (Yuma 39a) promised that a person need only sanctify himself a little and Shamayim will pour sanctity upon him in abundance.

⁶ Reprinted from Vahaer Einainu, Chapter 3.

Some individuals may have a particular immoral fantasy that has been challenging them for years. Again, this is no cause to feel hopeless. This could actually be the purpose of his having been created. It is his personal task that Hashem has entrusted him - to privately keep on championing kedushas hamachashavah, and raising its flag ever higher.

The Baal Hatanya continues that if the unwanted sight keeps vividly re-appearing and replaying itself in your mind, the way to dismiss those unwanted thoughts is to completely ignore them and turn your mind to a totally different subject. Strike up a conversation with someone, sing yourself a song, or just distract yourself in some other way. Concentrate on something else completely - anything! That's far healthier and more practical than trying to push those images out of your mind. If there is a person standing in a cyclist's path, the cyclist would not confront him with logical arguments. He will but swiftly swerve!

Never try to deal with undesirable thoughts directly. Just as touching mud gets your hands all dirty, so too struggling with evil brings you in close contact with it. Just focus your thoughts on something else. Engross yourself in your chosen topic; with Hashem's help, you will succeed.

In conclusion, the Baal Hatanya sheds light on something that poses a real riddle, an occurrence we meet up with all too often. Why do bothersome thoughts often choose to present themselves right in the middle of our learning or davening? What do we really want to do - approach our Creator or, l'havdil, follow our base desires? Can we assume that our avodah is therefore worthless? Surely, if my davening or learning would be of worth, these forbidden thoughts would not be popping up. This phenomenon calls for some clarification.

Two distinct, yet co-existing, forces are at work here. Thoughts of Torah and *yirah* emanate from the Godly soul within us, while desires for materialism have their source in our animalistic *nefesh*. The two opposing forces are permanently engaged in a power struggle, vying for control.

As soon as our Yetzer Tov takes charge, Satan's side feels threatened and rushes desperately to entrench itself deeper into the mind. This explains those unsolicited, distracting thoughts that arise out of the blue. It doesn't mean something's wrong; it's just the Satan having an allergic reaction to our spiritual sincerity.

The two combatants function simultaneously, yet independently. Hence, despite the tzad hatumah reacting so fiercely against one's learning and davening, it is a separate entity; one cannot therefore conclude that his service to The King of kings is unworthy. Our mitzvah, though under attack, remains of immense value and has in no way gone down the drain.