

LET'S LEARN CHASSIDUS

With Rabbi Shais Taub



VEN ER CHAPT ZICH... WHEN HE CATCHES HIMSELF

WHY IS IT HARD TO BE GOOD?

Why does it have to be hard to be good? Have you ever wondered about that?

I don't mean it as a complaint. Hashem can do whatever He wants. I mean it as more of a philosophical question. How does it make sense that Hashem would create a world, send me to that world for a purpose, and then make it hard for me to fulfill that purpose? What's the point in that?

At a Purim *farbrengen* (5729) the Rebbe told the story of one of Reb Levi Yitzchak Berditchever's arguments with Hashem. Said the Berditchever, "What do you want from the Jews? If the delights of Gan Eden were right here in this physical world so we could see them with our eyes, and the temptations of this world were only found written in books, You would have a valid claim. But since You did the opposite and put the temptations of this world in front of our faces and hid the spiritual pleasures in books, what claim can You possibly have against us?"

And while this is a splendid argument if you want, like the Berditchever, to defend those who have stumbled, it doesn't answer the question of why

Hashem would make the world like this in the first place.

THE PESACH PARADOX

If we want to answer this big question about life, we should answer a smaller question about Pesach. Because Pesach is sort of a microcosm of life.

You know what's ironic about Pesach? First we meticulously rid our homes of every last speck of *chametz*, then we proceed to bring home massive amounts of a product made from the exact same ingredients as *chametz*!

I'm talking about matzah. We purposely combine flour and water, the two things that make *chametz*, then race against the clock to bake these ingredients before they turn into the very same stuff we just got rid of. Baked in 17 minutes—matzah. Baked in 18 minutes—*chametz*. Why create all this tension?

I understand we can't just get rid of matzah altogether. We have a *mitzvah* to eat matzah on Pesach. But here's an idea. Why don't we make matzah from the kinds of flour that can never become *chametz*? You know, like potato starch or tapioca flour. You've seen the fake hotdog buns they make out of potato starch these days? The "*shehakol*" bread? Well, if they can do that, they can certainly make fake *shmurah matzah* out of the same stuff. It would make baking matzah so much calmer. No rush. No hurry. No risk. And we wouldn't even have to worry about *gebrokts*. Sounds like a good idea, yes?

So before anyone gets excited,



this is actually an old question. The *Gemara (Pesachim 35a)* suggests this solution... and shoots it down. No, says the *Gemara*, it doesn't work that way. Only those grains that can become *chametz* may be used to make matzah.

In other words, something isn't matzah just because it's not *chametz*. It's only matzah when it could have and would have become *chametz* if not for our vigilance.

But why? The Torah doesn't say you have to do work until the last minute before Shabbos. It doesn't say that you should eat until the last second before Yom Kippur. (Indeed, the rabbis decreed quite the opposite and created an extra buffer zone in both cases.) So why are we forced to put ourselves in a risky situation when it comes to avoiding *chametz*?

THE ADVANTAGE OF A FAST HORSE

One of the followers of the Alter Rebbe had a teenage son who we would call today "a youth at risk." He had been a fine boy, devoted

to his studies, and observant of the *mitzvos*, but suddenly, something got into him. The heartbroken father went to the Alter Rebbe and begged him to tell him what to do.

"Do you think you could persuade your son to come and see me?" the Alter Rebbe asked.

The *chossid* returned home trying to think of a way to get his son to the Rebbe. They lived in a small town outside of Liozna where the Rebbe lived. The father had an idea. His son was fond of horseback riding. Now, it was not considered nice for a Jewish boy to ride on horseback, but his son did not worry about what people might say, and whenever the opportunity presented itself he would ride right into town on horseback. So the father thought up an errand and asked his son to go into town.

"If I can ride into town..." the son said. The father agreed.

The young man went galloping into town. Little did he know that the errand was just a pretext to get

him to the Rebbe.

Shortly he found himself facing the Rebbe, who greeted him warmly. "Why did you choose to ride into town on horseback, instead of in a buggy?" the Rebbe asked.

"Why not take advantage of such a fine horse?" the boy replied.

"And what is that advantage?" asked the Alter Rebbe.

"A good horse runs fast. You reach your destination so much more quickly," said the young man.

"That is if you are on the right road," countered the Rebbe, "but if you are on the wrong road, you can travel more quickly in the wrong direction!"

"Even so," insisted the young man, "a fast horse can help him get back to the right road more quickly as well... *ven er chapt zich*, once he catches himself, and sees he's on the wrong path."

"*Ven er chapt zich... ven er chapt zich...*" the Alter Rebbe repeated.

The Alter Rebbe's holy words struck the young man. He understood that the fast horse

was a metaphor. The young man had passion and energy. It could lead him astray or it could be well directed.

So it is with all of us. The capacity we have to ruin our lives, *chas v'shalom*, is the very same capacity we have to accomplish our purpose in life. It's the same potential. It just depends how we use it.

THE SAFE BET

In that case, it would be less risky not to have a fast horse, or even not to have a horse at all, just like it would be less risky not to deal with matzah. And if you *really* want to play it safe, it would be less risky for the soul never to come into this world. It could stay in heaven.

But here's the thing. Hashem, for His part, is looking to win big, and in order to do so, He is ready to bet it all. So He sent us down here, behind enemy lines, and even gave us a voice of the enemy that speaks to us in our own minds. The point is not to make it difficult for us. The point is so that we can even use all of that stuff too. We can redirect the fast horse. That's the only way to actually come out ahead. Good that comes from good doesn't increase the net amount of good. Good that comes from its opposite is the only thing that creates more good.

As the Chasam Sofer explains (*Toras Moshe, Sefer Vayikra* on Pesach), this is precisely why Hashem refused to give the Torah to the angels even though they pleaded with Him to do so. Hashem told Moshe to counter the angels' arguments that the Jewish people would fail to keep Torah, and Moshe said to them, "Do you angels even have an evil inclination?" With that,

the debate was over. Hashem gave the Jews the Torah (*Shabbos* 88b.)

Why should that have been Moshe's winning argument when seemingly that should have been an argument against the Jews and in favor of the angels?

That's precisely the point. Angels can be good. But they can't make more good than there already is. Only with souls in bodies can Hashem make a "profit" on His investment, so to speak. Because souls in bodies have to deal with the negativity, and not just ignore it but turn it into positivity too.

And that means...

HIGH RISK = HIGH REWARD

... because Hashem was looking for the greatest gain of all—when darkness itself becomes light and this world becomes holier than heaven.

That can't happen by giving Torah to angels. It only happens by giving the Torah to souls who have bodies and live with temptation and distraction.

And it's the same idea with matzah. Why is matzah so risky? As the software developers say, it's not a bug, it's a feature!

We know that the puffiness of *chametz* represents ego while the flatness of matzah represents humility. But matzah isn't inherently flat. Left on its own, it will rise and become *chametz*. Matzah is only matzah because we don't allow it to become *chametz*. But the fact that all matzah had the potential to become *chametz* is not a bug, it's a feature.

And it's the same with us. The very same thing that makes it *hard* to be good is what makes it possible

to be *truly* good. Because true good, the good that Hashem created the world for, is the good that comes from redirecting the potentially bad.

It's like the fast horse. It can take you away from the destination or it can get you there faster. As Moshe asked the angels, "Do you even have a *yetzer hara*?" Angels are like potato starch. They can't become *chametz* and they can't become matzah.

So Hashem isn't making it hard for you to do your job by telling you to be good and then giving you a *yetzer hara*. Your job on this earth is to be good with your *yetzer hara*.

So from now on, when you think about yourself with all of your potential strengths and weaknesses, see yourself as dough. This same dough can become *chametz*. Or it can become matzah. And only because it can become *chametz* is it able to become matzah. So don't reject any part of yourself and don't lament the way Hashem made you. You are exactly as you are supposed to be. You are Hashem's high risk/high return investment. ❧

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