

Overcoming Temptation With Temptation

פרשת שמייני

When battling our evil inclination for temptations and pleasures that are forbidden, we often use a multi-pronged approach. We may focus on how bad indulging in forbidden pleasure really is for us, and will result in a severe consequence. Perhaps we would reflect on Hashem's kindness and feel indebted to him. We may try to invest more time into Ruchnius to counteract the draw of the Gashmius. Although these approaches seem effective on the surface, it is clear from the Medrash Tanchuma that overcoming temptation requires more than the above suggestions.

The Medrash Tanchuma states, "Hashem said to Moshe, warn the Jewish people not to eat bad things, and they should not say that Hashem forbade good things from the Jewish people. This is because Hashem said, everything that I commanded the Jewish people not to do, I permitted a substitute parallel to it. I did not allow you to eat pig, however I permitted to you the tongue of a fish called shibutah, that has a similar taste to pig. Why did I go so far, to create a substitute for everything that I banned? This was in order that I would be able to give a reward to the Jewish people for keeping the Mitzvos."

"The only antidote is knowing that for every restriction we have, Hashem has substituted an alternative pleasure."

The implications of the Medrash are that if Hashem only forbade things and didn't create substitute equivalent pleasures, it would have a negative impact on our ability to keep the Mitzvos. At first glance this is perplexing and requires further clarification. Why would this have such a negative impact on our performance of the Mitzvos, if we are aware of all the good that Hashem bestows upon us? Additionally, Hashem telling us that it is bad should suffice to help us maintain our self control. Substituting the actual pleasure seems unnecessary.

We see from here that if we perceive Hashem as One who restricts our pleasures, it may interfere with our relationship with Him. The only antidote to that is knowing that for every restriction we have, Hashem has substituted an alternative pleasure. Attempting to ward off the evil inclination through focusing on love and fear of Hashem is not enough to compensate for the negative feelings that may come from having restrictions.

There is an important lesson derived from the above Chazal impacting our outlook on pleasure and temptation, as well as an integral strategy in subduing the evil inclination. Often we tend to look down at those enveloped by desire, and advise them to address their struggle through increased spiritual fortitude. We see from here that we should not underestimate the negative feelings that restrictions can engender, but rather we should realize that in addition to the good that the Mitzvos innately provide, we also have additional permitted pleasures that we can partake in.