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The Yetzer Hora "Appears" To Look So Big

The Gemara (Sukkah 52a) says, "In the future, Hashem will bring out the *yetzer hora* (evil inclination) and slaughter it in front of the righteous and the wicked. To the righteous, the *yetzer hora* will appear to look like a tall mountain, while to the wicked it will look like a thread."

Let us reflect into this. How big indeed is the *yetzer hora*? To the righteous *tzaddikim*, it looks very big. If so, why does the Gemara say that it only "appears" to be big? The Gemara should have just said that the *tzaddikim* see the *yetzer hora* as very big, and not just that it "appears" to look big. It sounds like the *yetzer hora* isn't really that big, and it just "appears" to look big. The same question we can ask about the wicked people, to whom the *yetzer hora* appears as a small thread. Why does it only "appear" to them as small? Shouldn't the Gemara just say that they "see" the *yetzer hora* as small, and not just that it "appears" to them to be small?

The Essence of the Yetzer Hora

Chazal revealed here a great fundamental: the *yetzer hora* is not a true reality! It only exists in our imagination.

That is why the Gemara didn't say that the righteous or the wicked "see" the *yetzer hora*'s size. It is because the *yetzer hora* does not have any real size; it is entirely an illusion. (On a deeper note, all of Creation is an illusion. On an even deeper note, there is the true reality, and then there is a false reality that gets created from imagination.)

We find this when Avraham Avinu went to go bring Yitzchok by the Akeidah. Chazal say that the *yetzer hora* appeared to him in the form of a river to get in his way. There was really no river there; it was an illusion that looked like a river in front of him.

This is the entire power of the *yetzer hora*: it uses imagination (or fantasy, or illusion) to persuade us. Let us expand upon this discussion and explain what this implies for us.

How the Yetzer Hora Works

The *yetzer hora* convinces a person to do something evil. How does the *yetzer hora* convince you? It creates the following rationalization: It will somehow be beneficial for you to eat this or to buy this, etc. Then, the person feels pulled toward what he wants. So the *yetzer hora* convinces a person that somehow, this thing is good to pursue. If the person wouldn't see what benefit is here, he won't pursue it. So the *yetzer hora* convinces a person that there is something worth pursuing here.

This is the whole *yetzer hora's* power – it plays with our imagination and gets us to justify our behavior! It fabricates for us a fantasy upon another fantasy. All of these fantasies are not reality – they are all being imagined as reality.

The Vilna Gaon said that this world is like salty water; the more you drink from it (by indulging in physical pleasure), the thirstier you will become. In other words, a person thinks that this world's pleasures are satisfying, but this is just in his imagination. In reality, worldly pleasures only make a person thirstier, like salty water. The *yetzer hora* argues to a person that this world's "salty water" is really sweet and satisfying.

The Way To Fight the Yetzer Hora

After a person's imagination convinces him and sways his heart to believe that a certain thing is good and pleasurable for him to do, it becomes very difficult to fight it. It is the intellectual mind pitted in battle against the desire of the heart, and the person feels like he is fighting himself.

However, if a person is wise, he will be able to avoid this inner struggle from being such a difficult battle. As soon as his imagination begins to convince him to do something wrong, he can discern that it's just in his imagination. The intellectual mind, our *seichel*, can show us as we're being tempted, that we are just imagining; that what we imagine isn't reality. As soon as we become aware that there is nothing substantial to the *yetzer hora's* argument, and that it is all just being imagined, we will be able to jump away from the *yetzer hora's* argument.

In order to succeed at this, a person has to possess strong mental abilities.[\[1\]](#)

Using Imagination As A Powerful Tool For Holiness

Until now we explained how the *yetzer hora's* entire power is to use imagination. Now we will explain the root concept of what imagination is, and how we can use it to serve Hashem.

A person has in himself seven discerning abilities. Five of them are the senses of sight, hearing, smell, speech and touch. In addition to this, a person has intellect and imagination. Our five senses are used to feel tangible things. Our intellect, though, can feel things that aren't physically tangible, by proving that something exists. Yet, our intellect is still limited, because it is within the bounds of reality. It cannot comprehend things which do not exist.

Our imagination, though, can imagine even things that do not exist, such as imagining a person with seven feet. From where does this ability in us come from? (People do not imagine things which they have never seen at all. People imagine things that they have distorted in their mind. Imagination works through a mental ability called *markiv* – to "combine" various images together and come up with distorted, exaggerated versions of the original image).

The Root of Imagination: The Realm of the Unlimited

First of all, let us remember that the power of imagination was created by Hashem! Hashem desired for us to use our imagination only up until a certain point. Beyond the limits of our imagination, we are not supposed to imagine.

Let's understand this now. Hashem is Endless, and He is unlimited. He can create anything. But He created this world to have certain limits. Our imagination is thus a novelty, because it can come up with things that go beyond our limits. Our imagination can tap into the infinite – the sphere of the unlimited, the *Ein Sof* of Hashem. So imagination is an awesome power that we have which can help us enter the unlimited and shatter our usual limited perception; our imagination can serve to draw us closer to the *Ein Sof* of Hashem.

Therefore, our imagination never really imagines something that is a totally novel concept. It imagines an endless kind of concept, something that's above the limits of Creation.

If so, imagination is a total reality. Our imagination can imagine the reality of the *Ein Sof* – the endlessness of Hashem. Imagination is our portal that connects us to the unlimited layer of reality, which is beyond our normal perception that is limited. Normally, we are not able to connect ourselves to the sphere of the unlimited – we can't do it with our mind, and we can't do it with our senses. But we can do it through our imagination.

Using Imagination Needs Guidance

However, there is a great danger in using imagination. Since imagination is essentially a power that can perceive the realm of the unlimited, a person might make the mistake of connecting to the unlimited using his normal limited perception. He might try to use his senses, which are limited, to sense the realm of the unlimited, which cannot be felt through our senses. If he attempts to do it, he will never feel what he's imagining.

The *yetzer hora's* tactic is that it fools a person to believe that he's actually sensing what he imagines. It's a lie, because a person cannot ever sense what he's imagining. But when a person erroneously believes that he can, he falls into the *yetzer hora's* trap. The correct attitude is rather for a person to believe that although he's imagining something real, he cannot sense what he's imagining. Imagination can be a very positive we use to serve Hashem (and soon we will explain how to use it), but this can only be if a person realizes that he cannot use his limited senses to feel what he's imagining. We cannot mix our limited perception with the realm of the unlimited, and trying to do only causes a person to make grave errors.

Using Imagination For Holiness

How indeed do we use our imagination for holiness? What we can do is to imagine something holy, such as the *Beis HaMikdash*, or what it would look like when our nation would trek to Jerusalem each festival. The *sefarim hakedoshim* also bring that one should imagine that he is in Heaven and singing with the angels to Hashem. There are also other various holy images that are brought for one to practice.

However, a person has to always be aware that even such holy images are only imagination, and that they are not actually taking place in reality. If a person begins to think or feel that these things are really happening, he must immediately stop imagining it. It is dangerous. Imagination has to be used merely to awaken a person, but a person should never live in his imagination.

Imagination: A Tool To Reach Our Aspirations

In addition to this, our imagination can only serve to be a great tool that assists us in our aspirations. It opens up to us realms that are far from us, and inspires us to want to reach those unlimited places.

However, a person has to be very aware that it is only in his aspirations to reach the unlimited, and that he is not actually on that level yet.

Many people have made the mistake of fooling themselves that they are reaching their aspirations, while in reality they haven't reached yet those aspirations. A person must be aware of what his current level is and what his aspirations are, and that his aspirations, while being wonderful, have not been attained yet. Therefore, we have to be very careful with imagining for ourselves high aspirations.

[1] For a more detail discussion on how to overcome the *yetzer hora*, [see *Getting To Know Your Thoughts, Chapter 17: Using Imagination For Holiness*](#) [1].

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Links

[1] <http://www.bilvavi.net/sugya/daes.mach?page=1>