

Bereishis

Redheads aren't always evil

If you improve yourself, you will be forgiven; but if you do not improve yourself, sin crouches at the door.

Bereishis 4:7

Filled with rage, Cain was on the verge of murdering Hevel (Abel). Hashem spoke to him and offered him a choice: either improve and be forgiven, or fall into the clutches of sin. Cain did not accept the good advice; he killed his brother.

Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, compiler of the Mishnah, and Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, the mighty Roman emperor, were the closest of friends.¹ Known as simply “Rebbi and Antoninus,” together they studied Torah and explored the range of Jewish philosophy. The Talmud² records one of their conversations:

Antoninus asked Rebbi, “At what stage does a man receive his *yetzer hara* [internal urge to do evil]?” Rebbi responded, “When he is formed as a fetus.”

Antoninus rejected this answer, countering, “If that were so, the fetus would kick its way out of its mother’s womb prematurely and would not survive.” What he meant was that since the *yetzer hara* is a self-destructive urge that overwhelms our normally rational consideration of the consequences of our actions, were this urge present in the fetal state, it would manifest itself in the unborn baby by its clawing its way out into the world, even before its body was developed enough to survive.

In response to Antoninus’s conclusion, Rebbi – one of the wisest Torah minds in the

¹ Avodah Zarah 10b–11a. *Doros Harishonim* identifies this Antoninus as Marcus Aurelius Antoninus. See also R. Avigdor Miller’s *Exalted People* (pp. 166–7), where he writes, “The relationship between Rebbi and the emperor Marcus Aurelius, which the Sages relate at length, was a most remarkable episode. In vain would one seek a mention of it in Roman histories; for it would have been suicidal for any prominent Roman, let alone an emperor, to let it be known that he was a disciple of a Jew. Marcus Aurelius resided for a time in the land of Israel at Caesarea, when Rebbi was at Zippori (where he spent the last seventeen years of his life, excluding the short time before his death when he resided at Beth Shearim). By means of one of the underground tunnels (which abounded in the land of Israel and were famous during the war of Betar), Antoninus visited his teacher frequently and sought his counsel not only in matters of mind and soul, but also in the affairs of government.” Though others have identified our Antoninus as Antoninus Pius, adoptive father of Marcus Aurelius (and his father-in-law as well), we have chosen to prefer R. Miller’s conclusion, for among historians of his caliber, none shared his phenomenal breadth of knowledge of both Talmudic and Midrashic sources.

² Sanhedrin 91b.

history of the world – commented, “This is something that I learned from Antoninus. Not only that, there is a verse that supports him as well: ‘Sin crouches at the door.’”

Why was this insight taught to Rebbi by Antoninus? What did Antoninus know about human nature that even the greatest Rabbi of the generation did not?

The Maharsha³ and others⁴ point to an apparent proof in the Torah against Antoninus’s argument. While pregnant with her twin sons, Yaakov and Esav, Rivka suffered exceedingly from their kicking within her. Most of all, she was troubled by the correlation between her babies’ movements vis-à-vis her location. When she passed by a house of Torah study, Yaakov would beat the walls of her womb, indicating that he wished to come out and be in this place, studying Torah.⁵ When she passed by a house of idol worship, Esav would beat the walls of her womb. Rivka “sought God” for an explanation of this behavior.

The Maharsha wonders: If, in fact, Rivka’s dread was that her child sought to worship idols, this would seem to support Rebbi’s first argument by showing that the Torah seems to indicate that a fetus does have a *yetzer hara* while still in utero. After all, with no inclination to do evil, there would be no passion to run after false gods. Does this not contradict the teaching of Antoninus?

Rivka consulted with Shem, son of Noah,⁶ and he told her, “You have two *goyim* in your womb.”⁷ *Goyim* are nations, yet the word *goyim* here is spelled in a peculiar way, such that it appears to spell “*ge’im*,” meaning “elite ones.” The Talmud⁸ teaches that Shem was hinting that “there are two elite ones who will come from these children,” and furthermore, this hint also pointed to Rebbi and Antoninus. Descended from Yaakov and Esav, respectively, Rebbi and Antoninus lived upper-class lifestyles; they were wealthy enough that their tables were filled with every delicacy, and the most delicious fruits and vegetables, even when they were

3 Ad loc.

4 *Gur Aryeh*, Bereishis 8:21, 25:22; *Be’er Sheva* to Sanhedrin, ibid. See also *Sefer Chasidim* 1137, and the comments of Chida there in his *Bris Olam*.

5 One may similarly wonder why Yaakov wanted so urgently to get out of the womb to study Torah. After all, the Gemara (Niddah 30b) teaches that in the womb, a child is taught the entire Torah by an angel. *Maadanei Asher* (5768 Toldos) suggests that Yaakov rebuffed the angel on the basis that Torah is far more valuable when it is earned by a person than when it is given to him as a gift. See, however, *Etz Yosef* (Sanhedrin, ibid.), who suggests that though Antoninus was correct, once a fetus is seven months into gestation (and therefore viable), his *yetzer hara* is implanted. *Etz Yosef* thus solves the question of the Maharsha by explaining that Esav only tried to escape the womb to serve idols after the seventh month of pregnancy. From the words “sin crouches at the door,” the Talmud also derives that at birth, a baby forgets all of the Torah he learned in the womb; thus, it would seem that if *Etz Yosef* is correct, then Yaakov would have forgotten the Torah taught by the angel at the same time that he got his *yetzer hara*. In this case, Yaakov only wanted to be born early because he was eager to begin relearning the Torah that he was to forget. Accordingly, he was not rejecting the angel at all.

6 Rashi on Bereishis 25:22 s.v. *valteilich lidrosh*

7 Bereishis 25:23

8 Avodah Zarah 11a

out of season.⁹

Rabbi Chaim Vital,¹⁰ the leading student of the *Arizal*, wonders what sort of comfort Shem sought to offer this worried mother. Learning that she carried twin sons who already were archenemies battling within her, what solace would she find in knowing that someday their descendants would be richer than everybody else?!

Rabbi Vital explains that Rebbi and Antoninus were not just descendants of Yaakov and Esav. At some level, they *were* Yaakov and Esav. Rebbi's soul carried the spark of the soul of Yaakov,¹¹ while Antoninus was a reincarnation of Esav.¹² Shem revealed to Rivka that although her babies were at odds with each other now, she must not despair. It might take a thousand years, even two thousand, but eventually, Yaakov and Esav – Rebbi and Antoninus – would find their way to love each other and work together in harmony.

Rabbi Vital's explanation only makes the Maharsha's question even sharper. Antoninus is a reincarnation of Esav, the one person in the Torah who apparently demonstrates a *yetzer hara* even in his mother's womb. How can Antoninus be the one to claim that the *yetzer hara* does not enter a fetus before its birth?¹³ Antoninus's argument creates a paradox that begs to be

9 *Maharsha* (ad loc., s.v. *lo tznon*). See also *Tosafos* (ad loc., s.v. *shelo*), who asserts that it was not that these vegetables were so difficult to attain, but rather that they opened one's stomach up to be able to eat far more than the normal portions, thus indicating how much food they were serving at their tables. *Paneach Raza* (Chayei Sarah) says something similar to *Tosafos*, but he adds that their greatness was that they served their guests food that would whet their appetites, trying to get them to eat as much as possible and displaying no stinginess at all. See also *Tosafos Hashalem* there, who quotes the Rokeach that these foods were signs indicating whether it was safe for Rebbi and Antoninus to meet. See the question of R. Wreschner in his *Seder Yaakov* to *Avodah Zarah* 11a on this approach. *Tzror Hamor* (Toldos) explains that two of the vegetables mentioned, radishes, and lettuce, hint to the revealed parts of Torah, and the secrets of the Torah respectively, since radishes grow mostly exposed from the ground, whereas lettuce grows in a hidden way. *Likkutei Chaver ben Chaim* (Plaut) to *Brachos* 18a (s.v. *bisfra*) quotes his teacher the Chasam Sofer as explaining these vegetables also as having to do with methods of Torah study that they engaged in together. *Yalkut Hameiri* (to *Avodah Zarah* 11a) quotes R. Avraham Yakubb of Vashaltz (who was murdered by Arab terrorists in Israel in 1928) who also taught that these were part of the methods of Rebbi and Antoninus when they needed to be communicating Torah ideas to one another without others knowing what they were doing.

10 *Eitz Hada'as Tor*, vol 2, 80.

11 This was a teaching of the *Arizal* (quoted in *Pri Tzaddik*, *Sendas Pidyon Haben* 1, Balak 13). *Megaleh Amukos* (Vayetze, *ofen* 84; see also *Seder Hadoros* s.v. *Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi*) taught that the appellation “*HaNasi*” is an acronym for “*nitzotz shel Yaakov Avinu*” (a spark of Yaakov our Patriarch). See also *Sdei Chemed* (vol. 4, *Klallim*, *resh*, *klal* 46, and vol. 6, *Rosh Hashanah* s.v. *umatzasi bishut*). Rav Shlomo Wolbe (*Shiurei Chumash* to *Vayechi* 49:33 s.v. *vayigra*) says that just as our Sages taught (*Taanis* 5b) that Yaakov Avinu never dies, so too, we find (*Kesuvos* 103a) that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi would return every Friday night [even after his passing] to recite Kiddush for his family. Interestingly, Rav Wolbe also describes this as explaining why the great Kabbalists (including the Vilna Gaon) reported that Yaakov revealed himself to them, since he is not as disconnected from this world as other dead people are.

12 While the idea of reincarnation of the soul is far from our minds' ability to grasp, and while the nature of the soul itself and its manifold parts are a mystery to us, nevertheless, there is great insight that we can glean from these teachings, and we take what we can.

13 *Toldos* s.v. *inyan shomar Antoninus*

resolved.

To reconcile this paradox, we require a real understanding of Esav's capacity for good.

The Torah says that Esav was born with fiery red hair – and so was King David. These two are the only people in Jewish Scripture to be called *admoni*, redheads.¹⁴ The Midrash¹⁵ records that people were concerned because at birth, David looked just like Esav. The Ohr Hachaim¹⁶ writes that redheads are “hot natured.” The fifteenth-century work *Tishbi*¹⁷ goes so far as to assert that when the Talmud¹⁸ warns about the dangers of *tzvuim* (usually defined as “fakers” or, literally, “painted ones”), it actually is warning us to stay away from redheads, since the majority of them are wicked!¹⁹ [*In the spirit of full disclosure, this author would like to inform the reader that he is blessed with a headful of red hair.*]

Chida²⁰ writes that when Yaakov was born, King David was meant to be born along with him, but a devastating mistake was made and Yaakov's twin was instead Esav. A mistake?! God makes no mistakes! The devastating mistakes were Esav's own choices. Chida is telling us that Esav, with his innate abilities, could have been – *should* have been – a King David.

Hot-headedness is not an urge to do evil, per se. As Hashem told Cain, if a person's desires lead him to wish to do evil but he chooses not to, the desire is forgiven and the sin is averted. Such a person becomes stronger and better because of his desirous inclinations; passion alone does not make him evil.

14 Bereishis 25:25, and *Shmuel I* 16:12. See *Zohar*, vol. 3, 50b regarding the contrast.

15 Bereishis Rabbah 63:8; Midrash Bereishis 63:19; Midrash Shmuel 19:6

16 Bereishis 49:5

17 S.v. *tzeva*

18 Sotah 22b

19 See also *Megadim Chadashim* to Toldos (p. 388) where he quotes *Shvilei Emunah* (*nesiv* 4, *shvil* 1), who asserts that red hair is associated with foolishness and excessive anger. He also cites *Korban Reishis* (Rosh Hashanah 22b s.v. *oleh bayisi*), where he explains the name *Maaleh Adumim* in this light. This sheds light on the story recorded in Nedarim 9b about a young shepherd who controlled his passions in a valiant way and was praised greatly for it by Shimon HaTzaddik. This story is also recorded in Talmud Yerushalmi (Nedarim 1:1), where a further detail is added, and the boy is described as being an *admoni*, a redhead. His control of his passions was therefore remarkable.

See also *Vaani Bahashem Atzapeh* to Tehillim 7:3, by this author, for the comments of Rabbi Moshe Cordovero in his *Shiur Komah* (95), and Chida (*Midbar Kedemos*, *tes*, 2, and *Devash Lefi*, *shin*, 20, quoting *Tikkunei Zohar*), that the color and shape of every physical item in the world is reflective of its spiritual composition. See there for Chida's insight (*Devash Lefi*, *yod*, 1) that *aryeh* (lion) has the same *gematria* as *gevura* (strength), to this idea. The lion is the color of the sun, which is also defined in Shoftim 5:31 by its *gevura*. King David was a redhead and he was called lion-hearted (*Shmuel II*, 17:10). Gavriel is the angel of fire (Tanchuma Vayigash 8; *Zohar*, vol. 1, 263a; *Zohar*, vol. 3, 225a: “Gavriel in intellectual fire”; see also Yoma 21b), and his very name is rooted in the word *gevura*. Esav, of course, was a man of *gevura*. All these things connected to *gevura* share the same fiery color.

20 *Devash Lefi*, *dalet*, 14.

Furthermore, if you are born with a passion to spill blood, teaches the Talmud,²¹ you can choose to be a cutthroat, but you can alternatively choose to be a surgeon,²² work in a slaughterhouse, or train as a *mohel* and perform circumcisions. There is a time and place for everything – a time for war and a time for peace, as Solomon wrote.²³ King David was a warrior. He used his natural passion and drive to free his people of tyranny and to become the most beloved king the world has ever known. David did not deny his natural desires; he related to them, and in doing so, developed the ability to relate to every human being and touch them all with his songs of Tehillim. The world needs warriors, too.

Esav should have been a King David. He and Yaakov were meant to be an unbeatable team, with Esav the mighty warrior-king and Yaakov the spiritual inspiration. Sure, Esav was born with a desire to run out and worship idols – without that urge, there would have been no force impelling him to go in the right way, either. Esav's passionate nature expressed the God-given qualities he needed to become a powerful leader and a great king.

True, his passions drew him toward action and getting results. True, they drew him toward idol worship, hunting and warfare. But the passions alone are not wicked. Innate personality traits are not the *yetzer hara*. King David was born with the same nature and achieved greatness through directing and channeling his energies.

Rebbi was Yaakov. He did not share Esav's nature, and so he interpreted Esav's prenatal attraction to idol worship as an indicator that even then, Esav was evil – that man receives his *yetzer hara* in the womb.

Antoninus is Esav all over again. He says, "I am that man. I, too, was born fighting. I, too, share Esav's passions. I know Esav from the inside, and I say that it is not the passions of our innate personality that define the *yetzer hara*." Rather than choosing to be a killer and rapist²⁴ as Esav did, Antoninus finally actualized all the good that Esav could have achieved. Through his own choices, Antoninus's very life is the proof that contradicts Rebbi's theory.

Therefore, it is precisely Antoninus, Emperor of Rome, who must teach us the difference between personality and potential for righteousness. He reminds us that anything we find innately in our characters is by definition not a consequence of our choices – and is therefore not *yetzer hara*. There is no reason to fight it: the Talmud did not recommend that the man with a passion to spill blood meditate, breath deeply and inhale incense. His God-given nature really is one that needs to spill blood. He is better off embracing his innate qualities and looking

21 Shabbos 156a

22 The text literally reads "blood-letter," which, in Talmudic times, was considered a medicinal procedure.

23 Koheles 3:8

24 See Bava Basra 16b: "Rabbi Yochanan taught: On that day [that Avraham died], that wicked one [Esav] committed five sins: he raped a betrothed maiden; he murdered a person; he blasphemed; he denied that the dead will be revived; and he despised the birthright." (See also Targum Yonason, Bereishis 25:29, where six sins are enumerated.)

inside to discover how those very passions can be channeled to turn him into a King David.

“Sin crouches at the door” – but it will not crouch within you unless you choose for it to do so. Cain was enraged. He needed to hear that “sin crouches at the door” to be reminded that he must channel his temper productively to keep sin outside that door in order to avoid tragedy.

Each of us has within just what we need to make this world a much better place, even if that feeling inside is a feeling of murderous rage. The *Zohar*²⁵ teaches that red hair is also associated with fear of Heaven. “All is in the hands of Heaven, with the exception of the choice to fear Heaven.”²⁶ Ultimately, that much is up to you. Your inner red-head is not evil, you just have to know what to do with

25 *Tikkunei Zohar* 70

26 Brachos 33b