

# Mussar HaTorah

Torah Insights into Human Nature – Dedicated in memory of Rabbi A. Henach Leibowitz zt"l

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Rosh HaShana

“FOR WITH WISE METHODS YOU SHALL WAGE WAR...”  
(MISHLEI 24:6)

**We must use “wise methods” in our daily battles**

THE GREAT TALMUDIC SAGE, R. Yochanan, (Vayikra Rabba 21:5) interprets the verse quoted above as dealing with the greatest war of all – the struggle of man versus his *yetzer hara* – evil inclination. Shlomo HaMelech, the most brilliant person that ever lived and the author of Mishlei, is telling us that we must use “wise methods” in our daily battles with our lifelong adversary. R. Yochanan continues to explain that this battle is similar to the captain of a ship caught in fiercely blowing winds who must use his intelligence to set the sails of the ship astutely to weather the storm. This parable, R. Yochanan tells us, represents the approach that we should use to in fighting our nemesis, the *yetzer hara*.

We could understand R. Yochanan’s advice for people who have challenges in overcoming their desires and temptations. These individuals need special techniques and strategies to win the fight to do *mitzvos* and to avoid transgressions. But what about righteous people, the spiritual heavyweights, like Avraham Avinu or Moshe Rabbeinu? They certainly should not have a problem choosing the correct choices when faced with a test. Yet R. Yochanan was not speaking to a limited audience. He tells all of us: Use strategies to fight your temptations. You cannot win in a direct, head-on confrontation with the *yetzer hara*. Why can’t a *tzaddik* simply choose to do what he knows to be right?

**Hashem gives the person the superhuman ability to win**

The *yetzer hara* is not some foolish buffoon nor a dim-witted opponent. He has thousands of years of experience in ensnaring human beings; in terms of sheer strength, he is vastly more powerful than man, even an Avraham Avinu or Moshe Rabbeinu. The Mesilas Yesharim teaches us (Chapter 2 – *Zehirus*) that normally even a *tzaddik* would be easy prey for his shrewd trickery, but Hashem gives a person heavenly assistance to overcome this unfair advantage. This help, the Ramchal continues, is only offered to those who put in their best effort to defeat the *yetzer hara* on their own. Then, Hashem gives the person the superhuman ability to win the battle.

**A head-on attack will be doomed to failure**

Shlomo HaMelech is telling us that one’s “best effort” includes devising strategies and devices to help one succeed in this struggle for eternity. Even a *tzaddik* realizes that the only way anyone can effectively battle the *yetzer hara* is by using R. Yochanan’s advice. A ship captain knows he cannot beat nature. He cannot change the wind’s speed or direction. The captain’s only recourse is to use his wisdom to find ways to keep his ship on course. Perhaps he will adjust the sails, other times he may try a complicated steering maneuver – but he will never be able to stop the wind. This is how we must fight our battle against the *yetzer hara*, because a head-on attack will be doomed to failure.

May we approach Rosh HaShana prepared with a clear understanding of our shortcomings and a humble resolution to improve, but let us remember that realistic improvement requires a plan including tactics and strategies to counteract the schemes of our enemy. If we make this effort, it will trigger divine assistance to defeat the *yetzer hara*. With Hashem’s help, we will be successful in our *teshuva* and merit a year of health, happiness and continued growth towards spiritual perfection.