

PEREK II & IV

(Given after services on
May 25, 1969)

רבי' יבוסע אלמנר עין הרע ויבוסע הרע ואלקיעו הרע
בין יבוסע אלמנר ואלקיעו הרע ויבוסע הרע.

This Mishnah has a parallel in Chapter IV where in
the name of R. Elazar Hakapar we read of three similar qualities
that "take a man out of the world": בן יבוסע, בן אלקיעו, ואלקיעו הרע.

If we accept this parallelism, then "the evil eye"
should be understood not in its usual context as a kind of "jinx,"
but rather as a sense of begrudging which harms the perpetrator
much more than its intended victim. Jealousy, the evil eye,
eats away at the innards of the one who is jealous and slowly
destroys him, not only psychologically and spiritually, but even
physically. הרע ויבוסע and אלקיעו are obviously related. And
the pursuit of honor usually implies a desire to be superior to
others, and therefore, אלקיעו הרע.

But why only these three? And what is the meaning of
the strange phrase, "take him out of the world?" Should not have
the Mishnah mentioned three worse crimes, perhaps the three cardi-
nal sins?

I believe that the Tanna was aiming specifically at
three qualities or dispositions which lend themselves to misin-
terpretation. The cardinal crimes or the great virtues are simple

enough to observe. The blacks and the whites of life are not what make up the "world" -- which is for the greatest part comprised of shades of grey. It is rare that in crisis we have clear-cut options with which we are confronted: good and evil, right and wrong. Normally we have to make subtle distinctions, we are faced with paradoxes and ambivalencies and are forced to choose out of uncertainty and confusion.

This confusion and ambivalence is most oppressive when we deal with ideas and qualities which can serve both the ends of good and of evil, of the right and of the wrong. At such times not only is there an element of uncertainty as to whether we are using or abusing a certain quality, but there is a tendency for us to submit to rationalization -- to abuse a quality and to assume that we are doing the proper thing. Since the world is constituted mostly of such uncertainties and such qualities of double nature, when we confound their right use and wrong use, when we allow ourselves to rationalize away our own self-interest, then we lose contact with "the world" and we are removed from it: *פסוקים ופסוקים ופסוקים*. This is true of the three qualities mentioned in our two Mishnahs. They are of the kind that usually should be shunned, but at times have redeeming value. Not only that, but since according to Judaism, all human ethics and morality is patterned upon the divine norms of behavior, we find that these three elements are occasionally characteristic

of God Himself. They therefore lend themselves more to abuse by someone who does what is wrong and tries to excuse and rationalize his conduct by assuming that he is imitating God. Let us take them one by one.

(1) קנא or חמד -- jealousy. On the one hand, it is self-evident that this is a negative, nasty quality. Yet, on the other hand, it also is a commendable one. Thus, the Torah declares it to be a mitzvah for a man to be jealous of his wife if he has good grounds for suspecting any dalliance on her part. While an excess of jealousy can destroy a family, a certain minimum degree of jealousy is a tribute to a man's concern for his wife and is a form of mortar which cements the family structure and keeps it intact. Similarly, חמד, or jealousy, is one of the Divine Attributes: "He is a jealous God."

(2) חמד or חמד. Passion and libido can obviously be destructive. But, at the same time, the world could hardly exist without them. R. Meir said that when the Torah says ki tov, it refers to the חמד; when it says tov meod, "very good," it refers to the -- חמד, "for if not for the evil urge a man would not build a house or marry a woman or plant a vineyard." The so-called "evil urge" is not at all evil if it is channeled in the right directions. Similarly, for the parallel expression חמד. Desire or concupiscence is an un-

desirable quality: *נחמדים* *ל*. But there are certain things a man ought to desire passionately, such as the love of God. Furthermore, God Himself practices *נחמדים* as when He is described as desiring Zion and Jerusalem, *יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יִכָּלֵם*.

(3) *שנאת* *בשר* or *שנאת* *עוֹלָם*. To hate people is an obvious wrong; yet the Halakhah sometimes requires that we exercise

שנאת, as in the hatred of those who rebel against God or the hatred of evil itself. *שנאת* *עוֹלָם* *ל*. We know that kavod is something which man should avoid, something he should flee from. At the same time, a certain minimal amount of kavod is necessary at certain times, as when the Sages recommend that a scholar retain at least an eighth of an eighth of *נחמדים* -- in other words, it is necessary to insist upon kavod when such honor reflects the *נחמדים* *ל*. God too is One Who insists upon His kavod: *נחמדים* *ל*.

In all these cases, therefore, we find that a man's "world" is primarily constituted of qualities that can be used or misused, that have two faces, two natures, and that in their ambivalence challenge man to use his intelligence and his moral freedom in order to come to the right decision. If the issues were clear cut, black or white, man would not have to bother to decide, he would never have to exercise his freedom. But when we are dealing, as we must in this "world" of ours, with issues

that possess this potential for dual interpretation, then our decisions become paramount, our freedom is the real issue -- and on our intelligence everything else depends.

Therefore, when we deal with the three qualities mentioned, if we practice them illegitimately -- that is, when there is no real warrant for exercising them, but we rationalize that since they have redeeming value we may exploit them under all circumstances -- we drive ourselves out of our world, which can exist and be maintained only when the proper balance of these ambivalent qualities is exercised.