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On Moderation and Excess

Many years ago, <sup>Robt.</sup> Hyman Tuchman ע"ה commented to me that he wondered about a slight difference between the Christian and the Jewish expressions of aversion to Satan which may or ~~may not~~ reflect deeper attitudes. Thus, Jesus says to Peter, "Get thee behind me, Satan" (Matt. 16:23), implying that Satan is a menace only when he is *in front* of a person. Whereas the prayer in Judaism is, as expressed in the השכיבנו prayer of the daily מעריב service, מלפנינו ומאחרינו, והסר שטן, implying that Satan is a danger whether in front or in back of us.

(The השכיבנו blessing is already mentioned in the Talmud [ברכות די ע"ב] as an ordinance of the Sages which resonates with the theme of the previous גאולה blessing; the two together thus comprise what the Talmud terms אריכתא, a "long redemption" blessing. Eliezer Levi [186 עמ'] therefore argues that the השכיבנו blessing is a later addition, appended to the גאולה. Some much earlier authorities argue that the *content* of the blessing is ancient in provenance, and articulates well with the redemption theme, thus implying a co-equal status for both blessings even chronologically [thus 17 עמ' "יספר האשכול", הלכות תפלה וק"ש עמ' 17]. The particular expression, והסר שטן מלפנינו ומאחרינו, occasioned comment by a number of rabbinic writers, such as Abudrahm, R. Yaakov Zvi Meklenburg in his commentary "עיון תפלה," and R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, but none of them offers the explanation which follows.)

Now, some 40 or <sup>50</sup> ~~more~~ years later, it occurs to me that the position of "Satan" relative to the human victim of his evil designs sheds light upon his function. In *front* of a person, the tempter *misleads* and misdirects him--into a life of sin and degradation. When Satan is *behind* one, he does not direct or misdirect him, he merely pushes him harder in the direction he is already going. Why is this considered satanic? Because even if we grant that the individual was headed in the right direction, the "push" by Satan is intended to make him *go too far in the right direction*, to overdo his duty, to take virtue to an excess which (according to Aristotle) is the essence of vice. The Christians understood the danger of Satan in front of one, but not the damage he can do behind one. This the Jewish thinkers did understand quite well. Ecclesiastes (15:16) already warned against being over-righteous, and it is Maimonides who elaborated (in his "Eight Chapters" and in his הלכות <sup>הלכות</sup> <sup>העשר</sup>) a theory of character which puts virtue and vice on the same plane, with virtue occupying the center and vice the extremes.

מלפנינו ומאחרינו--removing Satan from both before and behind man.