

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



THE YETZER HORA AND ITS IN-LAWS

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Words that sound alike may not be blood relatives. Some Jews reject this premise of modern linguistics because it contradicts their religious belief that that all human languages descend from Biblical Hebrew. But this rejection depends on many unnecessary premises about the world and the Torah.

First, nothing in the Tower of Babel story requires the languages that emerge from the story to be related to the original unified language. Second, nothing in Torah rules out subsequent accidental or deliberate altering or invention of languages by human beings.

Even the most extreme advocates of the thesis that Biblical Hebrew is the language of Creation – which is no more required by Chumash than a belief that Egyptian Pharaohs issued edicts in Biblical Hebrew – acknowledge that the Torah has been pronounced differently in different times and places. Therefore, words that currently sound the same may not always have done so.

It takes a little more religious effort to accept that Biblical Hebrew words with identical Hebrew letters are unrelated, whether because they originated in different languages, or because the Biblical alphabet has fewer letters than a precursor. I don't have a theological problem with this position, but I understand why committed Kabbalists might.

What I have trouble accepting is that the Torah uses unrelated words that have the identical Hebrew letters without taking advantage of the human instinct to connect them.

The simplest way to take advantage of this reality is a straightforward pun. A subtler means is allusion; using word A in context X will necessarily call to mind context Y, because context Y uses word B, even though A and B are not blood relatives.

Such puns and allusions exist in most, perhaps even all, human audio cultures. The result is that over time, words that sound alike or are spelled alike become in-laws. This process can be accelerated and intensified by skilled authors, all the more so by the Author of all.

According to various concordances and dictionaries, the combination יצר may have at least two unrelated meanings in Torah, leaving aside proper names. One is the verb “to form” that describes many of G-d’s creative actions in Bereishit 2. The second is the noun that the Torah uses to describe some kind of human characteristic or production before and after the Flood. In Bereishit 6:5, Hashem sees that *yetzer libo rak ra kol hayom* = “the *yetzer* of the thoughts of (humanity’s) heart are nothing but evil all day” and therefore destroys humanity. In Bereishit 8:21, He notes that *yetzer lev haadam ra mineurav* = “the *yetzer* of the heart of the human (is) evil from his youth”, and therefore removes the curse He had placed on the land as a consequence of human sin. I think it’s almost certainly the case that these characterizations are intended to contrast directly with G-d’s *yetzirah* of human beings in Bereishit 2:7, and of animals in 2:19. Note especially that the human *yetzirah* has two yods; the animal *yetzirah* only one; and do not be satisfied with any efforts to explain this difference on a purely grammatical basis.

So far as I can tell, the only other common-noun *yetzer* in Chumash is found in Devarim 31:20-21:

כִּי־אָבִיאוּ אֵלַי־הָאָדָמָה וְאֲשֶׁר־נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי לְאַבְתָּי
 זָבַת חֶלֶב וְדָבַשׁ וְאָכַל וְשָׂבַע וְדָשְׁן
 וּפְנָה אֶל־אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים וַעֲבָדוּם
 וְנִאֲצָוֵנִי וְהִפָּר אֶת־בְּרִיתִי:
 וְהָיָה כִּי־תִמְצָאֵן אֹתוֹ רַעוּת רַבּוּת וְצָרוּת
 וְעָנְתָה הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת לְפָנָיו לְעַד
 כִּי תִרְעַתִּי אֶת־יָצְרוֹ
 אֲשֶׁר הוּא עֹשֶׂה הַיּוֹם
 כְּעָרֵם אֲבִיאוּ אֵלַי־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי.

When I bring them to the land which I swore to (their) ancestors
 flowing milk and honey
 (they) will eat and be sated and fattened
 (they) will turn to other gods and worship them
 and spurn Me and nullify My covenant.

It will be that when many evils and troubles befall (the Jews)
 that this song shall testify before (the Jews) as a witness;
 for it shall not be forgotten out of the mouths of (the Jews')
 descendants;

for I know (the Jews') *yetzer*
 what (the Jews) are doing today,
 before I bring them into the land which I swore.

The progression seems clear: now Hashem is even willing to bring a human and their *yetzer* into a blessed land *lekhatchilah*. However, because Hashem knows the *yetzer* of these humans – same as all humans – He knows that He will have to punish them (because He no longer curses the land because of humanity). Therefore, He sets the Torah up as an eternal witness that this cycle was foreseen.

Rabbeinu Bachya makes a logical extension. If the Torah needs to be eternal because of the human *yetzer*, what if that *yetzer* ceases to exist? One might answer that this is impossible; what G-d learns about humanity in the course of Chumash is that the *yetzer* is an integral part of human nature, and always will be. But Rabbeinu Bachya contends that there will be a stage of Resurrection, in the post-Messianic age, in which the human *yetzer hora* will be abolished, and therefore, Torah will be forgotten.

Rabbeinu Bachya grounds this in Midrash Mishlei's report that all holidays other than Purim will lapse at some future point.

What is unique about Purim? Rabbeinu Bachya doesn't explain, but I can guess: Purim is the holiday on which we pretend that the *yetzer hora* has already been abolished and the distinction between *tov* and *ra* is no longer necessary. In his postulated stage of Resurrection, it will be Purim all the time.

My this-worldly takeaway is that Purim is pretend. The Torah is written for people with a *yetzer hora*. More sharply, the Torah exists to remind us that we have a *yetzer hora* in the not infrequent times when we believe that we've overcome it.

G-d knows that we will often not be ready to hear the Torah's message until things go badly wrong in a way that challenges our belief in our own virtue. One purpose of Purim pretense is to force us to recognize what's real. Consciously letting our *yetzer hora* out just a little bit forces us to admit that it exists.

So much for the common noun *yetzer*.

Human beings perform a verb יצר twice in Chumash.

In Shemot 32:4, Aharon is *yotzer* with a *cheret* in order to produce the Golden Calf. It seems reasonable to connect this to G-d's *yetzirah* of animals, and at the same time to see this as an instance of the Jews believing themselves to be above having a *yetzer hora*. Had they not just received the Torah, and experienced G-d directly?

The other instance is Bereishit 32:8. With Esav almost upon him, *vayiyyra Yaakov meod vayetzer lo* = "Yaakov was greatly afraid and *yetzered*". *Yetzered* etymologically comes from צר –

Yaakov was troubled. Rashi beautifully comments that he was afraid lest he be killed, and *yetzered* lest he kill others.

Yet perhaps the Author also intends us to consider that at this moment Yaakov became acutely conscious that killing Esav would please a certain part of him, in other words that he became conscious of having a *yetzer hora*. Compare Netziv's claim that Yaakov was punished because he took pleasure in Esav's distress at finding out that Yaakov had taken his blessing.

Denying that we have a *yetzer hora* undermines the purpose of Torah. We can learn from Yaakov, and from Purim, and perhaps from Aharon's error, that the obligation to be aware of our evil inclination applies especially when we are facing a genuinely existential threat. Being aware of having a *yetzer hora* need not paralyze us, any more than *lehardil* G-d is paralyzed by the awareness that the Jews will not always be worthy of the Land He is bestowing on them. But pretending that our ruminations about how best to defeat our enemies are uninfluenced by our *yetzer hora*, that there is no element of *schadenfreude* influencing our thoughts, may risk bringing our unworthiness to His attention.

Shabbat shalom!