מדרש

Midrash

ON GENESIS 8:21

Why do the righteous rule their hearts, not the reverse

Bereshit Rabbah 34:10

The righteous master their hearts, while the wicked are mastered by theirs, as shown through a series of biblical proof-texts contrasting figures like Esav, Yerovam, and Haman with Hannah, David, and Daniel. God Himself testifies that the yetzer hara (evil inclination) is embedded in man from the start, a sobering admission compared to a baker, leaven-maker, or planter conceding the inferiority of their own product. The passage closes with Rabbi's exchange with Antoninos, concluding that the yetzer hara takes hold at the moment of birth (as one pushes to emerge from the womb), while the neshamah (soul) is only implanted afterward, lest the body, left too long without it, putrefy like unsalted meat. AI SUMMARY

“The Lord said to His heart” – the wicked are under the control of their hearts: “The scoundrel says in his heart” (Psalms 14:1); “Esau said in his heart” (Genesis 27:41); “Yerovam said in his heart” (I Kings 12:26); “Haman said in his heart” (Esther 6:6). But the righteous, their hearts are subject to them: “Hannah was speaking to her heart” (I Samuel 1:13); “David said to his heart” (I Samuel 27:1); “Daniel placed in his heart” (Daniel 1:8); “the Lord said to His heart.”

“I will not continue…and I will not continue” – it is powerful, it is powerful. The Rabbis say: “I will not continue” for the [present] children of Noah, “and I will not continue” for [future] generations. Rabbi Ḥiyya the Great said: Wretched is the dough whose baker attests in its regard that it is inferior – “[and the Lord said to His heart…] as the inclination of man’s heart is evil from his youth.” Abba Yosei HaTorati says: Wretched is the leaven whose maker attests that it is inferior, as it is stated: “For He knows our inclination; mindful that we are dust” (Psalms 103:14). The Rabbis say: Wretched is the sapling whose planter attests that it is inferior, as it is stated: “The Lord of hosts, who planted you, spoke evil of you” (Jeremiah 11:17).

Antoninos asked our Rabbi, saying to him: ‘From what point is the evil inclination implanted in a person? From the moment he emerges from his mother’s womb, or even before he emerges from his mother’s womb?’ He said to him:’ Before he emerges from his mother’s womb.’ He said to him: ‘No. Were it implanted in him while still in his mother’s womb, he [the fetus] would dig through her innards and emerge [by force].’ Rabbi conceded to him, as he was in agreement with the opinion of the Biblical verse: “As the inclination of man's heart is evil from his youth [neurav]” (Genesis 8:21). Rabbi Yudan said: “ne’erav” is written; from the moment that he pushes out [ninar] to emerge from his mother’s womb.

Antoninos also asked our Rabbi, saying to him: ‘From when is a spirit embedded in a person? From the moment he emerges from his mother’s womb, or even before he emerges from his mother’s womb?’ He said to him: ‘After he emerges from his mother’s womb.’ He said to him: ‘No. This is analogous to a piece of meat, if one were to leave it without salting it for three days, it putrefies.’ Rabbi conceded to him, as he was in agreement with the opinion of the Biblical verse, as it is stated: ”You granted me life

and kindness, and Your command [ufkudatekha] preserved my spirit" (Job 10:12) – from when did you place the soul in me? It is from when You deposited me [hifkadetani].

