

Desire: Temptation Toward Evil or Inspiration For Good
Compiled and Translated by Rabbi Noah Gradofsky¹

Note: Though this lesson is modeled on the UTJ's program, "Taking the MTV Challenge" and borrows a media clip from them, this lesson is not created or endorsed by UTJ. Excerpts from the media clips are found below as an appendix.

1. Media Clip: "House, MD" Season 2 Episode 23 (Episode #44 in the series) "Forever."

Video: <http://www.e-ark.net/rabbi/media/house.wmv>

A mother, whose brain tumor led her to a psychotic episode where she killed her son, refuses treatment for her brain tumor. Dr. House accepts this decision, while Dr. Foreman, who recently survived a near-death experience, and is now treating every day as a blessing, disagrees.

2. פרקי אבות ד: א (pirkei avot) Ethics of the Fathers 4:1

בן זומא אומר . . . איזהו עשיר השמח בחלקו . . .

Ben Zoma says: Who is rich? The one who is happy with his portion.

3. Genesis Rabbah 9:7 בראשית רבה ט: ז

This midrash comments on the words of Genesis 1:31 where God sees all of God's creations " וַיִּבְרָא טוֹב " and behold, it was very good."

רבי נחמן בר שמואל בר נחמן בשם רב שמואל בר נחמן אמר הנה טוב מאד זה יצר טוב והנה טוב מאד זה יצר רע, וכי יצר הרע טוב מאד, אתמהא, אלא שאלולי יצר הרע לא בנה אדם בית ולא נשא אשה, ולא הוליד ולא נשא ונתן, וכן שלמה אומר (קהלת ד) כי היא קנאת איש מרעהו.

Rabbi Nachman bar Shemu'el bar Nachman in the name of Rav Shemuel bar Nachman said: "behold it was very good," this is the good inclination, "and behold it was very good," this is the evil inclination. [This commentary is] Shocking! However, were it not for the evil inclination, a person would not build a house, and would not marry a woman, and would not have children, and would not do business. And thus Solomon says, "(I have seen all the work and all the excellent work) that it is all man's jealousy of his fellow (this also is vanity and evil spirit)." (Ecclesiastes 4:4)

4. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch on Genesis 4:7

Rabbi Hirsch is explaining God's words to Cain when Abel's sacrifice was accepted, and Cain's wasn't. God says, "Is it not that if you are good you will succeed . . ." Note this is the published translation of Hirsch, which was originally written in German.

No single one of the powers and natural tendencies which are given to man is either good or bad in itself, from the most spiritual down to the most sensuous. They are given to him for beneficial purposes to accomplish G-d's will on earth. The Divine Torah gives them as a positive aim and a negative limit. In the service of this purpose indicated by God and within these limits set by God, everything is good and holy. Separated from these purposes and outside these limits, coarseness and evil begins. G-d has given sensuality an appeal to your senses, not that it should master and direct you, but that you should direct it.

¹ Originally presented as a discussion prior to Slichot, September 8, 2007

5. Media Clip: "Wall Street"

Video: <http://www.e-ark.net/rabbi/media/greed.wmv>

6. פרקי אבות א:יד (pirkei avot) Ethics of the Fathers 1:14

הוא היה אומר אם אין אני לי מי לי וכשאני לעצמי מה אני . . .

He (Hillel) used to say: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me, but if I am for myself, what am I . . ."

7. Media Clip: "House, MD" Season 3 Episode 24 (Episode # 70 in the series) "Human Error."

Doctors House and Foreman debate what drives them as doctors.

Video: <http://www.e-ark.net/rabbi/media/house2.wmv>

8. Babylonian Talmud Horayot 10b

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב: לעולם יעסוק אדם בתורה ובמצות אפילו שלא לשמה, שמתוך שלא לשמה בא לשמה; שבשכר מ"ב קרבנות שהקריב בלק הרשע, זכה ויצתה ממנו רות

...

Rabbi Judah said in the name of Rav: A person should always immerse in Torah and mitzvot, even if it not be for its own sake, because out of what was not for its own sake, will come to be for its own sake, for as a reward for the 42 sacrifices that the evil Balak sacrificed, he merited that Ruth came from him .

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Babylonian Talmud Avodah Zarah 3b

דאמר ר' חנינא: גדול המצווה ועושה יותר משאינו מצווה ועושה.

For Rabbi Chanina said: One who is commanded and does, is greater than one who is not commanded and does.

Tosafot on Avodah Zarah 3b

גדול המצווה ועושה - פי' מפני שהוא דואג תמיד לבטל יצרו ולקיים מצות בוראו.

One who is commanded and does, is greater - Explanation: Because he always worries to overcome her inclination and fulfill the commandments of his creator.

11. פרקי אבות א:ג (Pirkei Avot) Ethics of the Fathers 1:3

אנטיגנוס איש סוכו . . . היה אומר אל תהיו כעבדים המשמשין את הרב על מנת לקבל פרס אלא הוו כעבדים המשמשין את הרב שלא על מנת לקבל פרס ויהי מורא שמים עליכם

Antigonus, man of Socho . . . would say, "Don't be like servants who serve the master in order to receive a reward, rather be like servants who serve the master not in order to receive a reward, and let the awe of heaven be upon you."

12. Rabbi Aaron Michelson (a colleague):

"I remember a time when I was going for an interview for CPE training and I had the devastating realization that I was not being altruistic when I helped people (or at least tried to) since I derived satisfaction. Someone later pointed out to me that, by that standard, altruism is nonexistent and the real difference between people (in terms of their moral development) is which pleasures they seek."

Appendix – Media Excerpts

1. Media Clip: "House, MD" Season 2 Episode 23 (Episode #44 in the series) "Forever."

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A mother, whose brain tumor led her to a psychotic episode where she killed her son, refuses treatment for her brain tumor. Dr. House accepts this decision, while Dr. Foreman, who recently survived a near-death experience, and is now treating every day as a blessing, disagrees.

HOUSE: Fine! Go on in there and tell her that every day is a blessing. So you killed your baby. Shake it off. Think positive. At least you're alive. [Foreman doesn't move to do so.] Hmm. Kind of hard to sell when you don't believe it, huh? And you never believed it. You just wanted all that crap you went through to mean something. Well, it didn't mean anything. It never does. Welcome back.

FOREMAN: Why are you doing this to me? I was happy.

HOUSE: "You were aspiring to be content."

FOREMAN: "Don't give me a semantic argument. I was content with the way things were! That's what happiness is."

HOUSE: "Yeah, if we were all just satisfied with what we had what a beautiful world it would be. We'd all slowly starve to death in our own filth, but at least we'd be happy. Listen. I need your self-worth to hang on this job. For kicking ass here to be all that lets you rise above miserable. If waking up in the morning is enough, I don't need you.

FOREMAN: I can live with that.

HOUSE: No, you can't. Not anymore.

5. Media Clip: "Wall Street"

Video: <http://www.e-ark.net/rabbi/media/greed.wmv>

GORDON GEKKO: The point is, ladies and gentleman, that greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right, greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed, in all of its forms; greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge has marked the upward surge of mankind. And greed, you mark my words, will not only save Teldar Paper, but that other malfunctioning corporation called the USA.

7. Media Clip: "House, MD" Season 3 Episode 24 (Episode # 70 in the series) "Human Error."

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Video: <http://www.e-ark.net/rabbi/media/house2.wmv>

FOREMAN: I don't want to solve cases, I want to save lives.

HOUSE: Do you think she cares? Do you think the husband cares? Do you think the children she can now have because of me are going to care why I saved her?

FOREMAN: I care.

HOUSE: About yourself. About your own ego! ...You're the selfish bastard, not me.