

An excerpt from *The Evil Inclination*

By Daniel Victor

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Rebbe Yehudah expounded: In the future time, the Holy One, Blessed Be He, will take the Evil Inclination and slaughter it in the presence of the righteous and in the presence of the wicked.

To the righteous, the Evil Inclination will appear as a high mountain, and to the wicked it will appear as a strand of hair. The righteous will weep and the wicked will weep.

The righteous will weep and say: 'How were we capable of overcoming such a high mountain?'

And the wicked will weep and say: 'How were we incapable of overcoming this strand of hair?'

And so too the Holy One, Blessed Be He, will wonder with them . . .

Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Succah 52A

Lev Livitski held his breath as Rabbi Berkowitz leaned forward, one hand clutching the edge of the prayer lectern, the other hand stroking his reddish-brown beard. The foot of the lectern was right at the edge of the dais—if it skidded just another inch or two, the rabbi would topple onto the students sitting in the first row of the assembly hall, a catastrophe that Lev had longed for since his first day of third grade. Lev narrowed his eyebrows and squinted his eyes as he focused his mind on Rabbi Berkowitz, muttering an incantation: “Come to me, Rabbi—you’re almost there. Come to me.”

But the Rabbi did not come to him. Instead, he continued lecturing Lev and his classmates about the Evil Inclination and about the Good Inclination—how these forces struggled one against the other for dominion over them every minute of their lives. Berkowitz was animated: the subject apparently excited him, the opportunity to make a difference in molding the character of his third-graders, setting them on the path to righteousness and steering them away from sin even before they really had a clear idea of what sin was. Because of the unusual intensity of the presentation, Lev Livitski stopped imagining Rabbi Berkowitz tumbling onto the first row and began listening to him; notwithstanding that Lev and his pals had already learned never to believe anything the Rabbi told them;

notwithstanding that they routinely referred to Rabbi Berkowitz among themselves as Rabbi Beserkowitz. The Rabbi paused for a moment and dramatically raised his fist in the air in front of his face, and for an instant Lev was distracted by that fist, the way it looked clenching the air, like the fist of God containing lightning or the wind, assuming that God in fact possessed a fist, which, theologically, of course, He didn't.

Even at eight years old, Lev thought he had a pretty clear notion of what Evil was. Evil was doing what was prohibited. And he thought that he understood what Good was—doing what was permitted, and also, of course, what was expected. When Lev did something that was forbidden, it was usually because he was inattentive or distracted, like carelessly flicking a light switch on the Sabbath. When he did something that was good, it was usually because someone—a rabbi, a parent—was urging him to do it.

But what Lev didn't know, and what Rabbi Berkowitz never bothered to explain to him or to anyone else, was what an inclination was. What did it mean to have an inclination to do the forbidden—an urge, a compulsion, an irresistible craving?

One night Lev was sitting at the dining room table in his parents' apartment in Flatbush doing Bible homework when he saw his mother motion to his father to join her at the kitchen sink. Lev knew that she wanted to whisper a secret. Her gesture made it obvious—a sharp, short,

beckoning movement with her hand, her thumb touching the tips of her fingers.

Lev's younger brother, Elya Meir, seven years old, was playing with toy trucks in the corner of the dining room. Shmuel, the youngest brother, who was three years old and called Shmu, was lying under the table, licking crumbs off the carpet, a habit for which he was already infamous.

Lev's parents stood side by side at the kitchen sink. His mother whispered to his father: "Shloime Strudler—he's off the derech. Golda told me."

Lev's father didn't say anything, but he raised his hand to his black velvet skullcap and moved it around on the top of his head as if he were using it to wipe something wet and sticky off his cranium. He peered up at the sputtering florescent light like he was searching for God Himself.

"It was only a matter of time," Lev's mother continued. "The cigarette. You remember the cigarette, don't you?"

Lev's father nodded. His parents' eyes met and they both turned and gave Lev a grave, anxious look. Lev continued to pretend that he was studying.

Lev knew what it meant to be "off the derech". Derech in Hebrew meant path, and to be off it was to begin to drift away from Jewish observance—the 248 affirmative religious obligations and the 365 prohibitions that comprised the basic core of halacha, Jewish law. So he understood in

some rudimentary way that when you were off the derech, you were no longer observing halacha.

And Lev also knew about Shloime Strudler and the cigarette. It had happened the previous year on the holiday of Simchas Torah, which marks the end of the annual cycle of weekly Torah readings and the beginning of the next cycle. On Jewish holidays like Simchas Torah, Jewish law permits a Jew to light a gas burner, a candle, or even a cigarette from a flame that has been lit before the onset of the festival. But one can't actively extinguish that flame during the holiday. So when a cigarette has burned down, although a Jew can let it go out on its own, he or she is prohibited from stubbing it out.

It was reported that Shloime Strudler was smoking a cigarette and when it had burned down to the filter, instead of letting it go out by itself, he threw it on the ground, put his shoe on it, and moved his foot back and forth to grind it out.

Some people said Shloime was drunk because it's customary to drink a lot of schnapps on Simchas Torah. But those who were there said he hadn't been drinking.

Some speculated that maybe Shloime had forgotten and just did it by accident, without thinking. But those who were there said he had a determined look on his face. Some said he had a defiant look on his face. No one said it was an accident.

When Lev heard about it, he thought: That's wrong. To stomp on a lit cigarette on Simchas Torah instead of letting it go out on its own accord—that's just plain wrong. How could anyone who knew better do such a thing on purpose, something that was so wrong?

And now he had learned that Shloime Strudler was off the derech.

What Lev didn't understand was how Shloime had actually gotten off it. Did he go to sleep one night while on it and in the morning wake up off it? Was he surrounded by rabbis wearing black coats and carrying sticks who forced him off? Or did he fall off?

The falling image was the most plausible. Lev visualized the derech as a narrow bridge without railings, one that spanned a chasm. The bridge was so high that its terminus was obscured by swirling clouds; and the chasm was so deep that its floor could not be perceived. A solitary figure steadfastly made his way against a headwind that suddenly increased in velocity, turning into a howling tempest with torrents of rain and fiery barrages of lightning. Finally, after much struggle, the exhausted traveler toppled off the bridge and into the chasm.

That's the way Lev imagined it. But it was not the way it happened to him.

2.

Twelve years after Shloime Strudler fell off the derech, Lev was a sophomore at Brooklyn College. The year was 2003. Like most of his friends from the Orthodox Jewish world, even though Lev was in college, he was still living with his parents, sharing a bedroom with his younger brothers, who numbered four by then. Their Flatbush neighborhood had grown increasingly religious and was now characterized as Black Hat, which alluded to the broad-brimmed fedoras that their neighbors adopted to demarcate the seriousness of their Orthodoxy. Lev's family did not wear black hats; moreover, Lev and his brothers didn't parade around in the other fashion accoutrements that defined the more extreme religious fervor of their neighbors: large velvet skullcaps, black suits, white shirts and ritual fringes dangling to their knees. The Livitski boys wore jeans and sneakers and denim jackets, and their skullcaps were compact and colorful, crocheted by their mother. The family described themselves as Modern Orthodox because Lev's parents valued such profane things as a secular university education. But the truth was that his family wasn't really that modern and they were plenty Orthodox.

One Shabbos morning, Lev got out of his upper bunk bed while his brothers still slept. Rather than get dressed right away and head to synagogue to join his father, who always went earlier to hear a daily Talmud class, Lev went

into the living room in his pajamas and sat on the sofa. He sat staring off into space, contemplating nothing.

In the Livitski apartment, no one ever sat in the living room. It was used maybe two or three hours a year, usually for gatherings like fundraising events for local Jewish charities or for an annual family Chanukah party. The living room was not intended to be used by Lev and his immediate family. Perhaps that was why his parents had selected such an uncomfortable sofa, Lev conjectured as he squirmed against the sticky plastic slipcovers—as thick as they were, he could still feel the buttons from the back of the tufted sofa digging into his spine.

From his perch, Lev faced an olive-wood bas relief of the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem that hung on the wall beside a bookcase containing his father's nineteen-volume set of the Vilna Talmud. The Wailing Wall was depicted as a parquet of different shades of olive-wood. In front of the Wall were silhouettes of stooped Hasidic Jews holding holy books. Lev's father once showed Lev a yellowing label pasted on the back of the frame that read: "Palestine 1936." His father had nodded knowingly and Lev had understood that this artifact was from before—before the singularity that defined Lev's world: the Holocaust followed only a few years later by the establishment of the State of Israel.

Lev became aware of how quiet it was in the living room, at least as compared to the rest of the apartment. It was a pleasant sensation, this silence. He recalled that he had

once overheard his father's wistful remark to a friend in synagogue: "The only time I'm ever alone," his father had confided, "is when I'm on the subway." Lev had long been perplexed by this statement until he began taking the subway each day to yeshiva high school and then to Brooklyn College. Standing in the crowded subway car, Lev thought he finally understood what his father had meant. There was so much tumult in Lev's life that it was soothing to just be: to stand anonymous in a tightly packed train with no one talking to him or expecting anything from him. And how much more so to just sit in the silence of the living room away from his four younger brothers and his parents.

His mother came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a dish towel. "What are you doing in the living room?" she called to Lev from the hallway.

"Nothing much," he replied.

"Well, if you're doing nothing much, get your tuches into gear and go to synagogue."

But Lev wasn't quite ready to surrender this sweet feeling of tranquility. He suspected it would be good for him if he had a little more time to reflect on . . . on . . . well, not so much time to reflect on anything in particular, but just time not to be bouncing off and reacting to one of his brothers or someone in synagogue. It wasn't as if there was something that had been bothering him for some time, something that he needed to work out. It was more that he hadn't really had much of a chance to even determine if

something was bothering him at all. He recalled an axiom from a course he had taken freshman year, Political Philosophy 101: “An unexamined life is not worth living.” Socrates had said that. Lev felt guilty thinking of something Socrates had said. Most of the rabbis of antiquity whom Lev had been taught to revere considered Socrates a pagan lightweight—at least that was what Lev had learned in the yeshivas in which he had studied. Lev turned to his mother standing in the hallway. “You know,” he said, “I just don’t feel like going to shul today. I think I’ll sit this one out.”

“What?” his mother shouted. “You don’t feel like going? You don’t feel like going? Since when has being Jewish anything to do with how you feel? Since when? Now get up and go meet your father!”

The conversation was over. Lev got to his feet, plodded to his room and began getting dressed while his brothers began to stir.

But his mother had asked a question that triggered a torrent of other questions, none of which had satisfactory answers. Since when did being Jewish—or more accurately, Lev’s Jewish observance—have anything to do with what he was feeling? His mother was right. Judaism was not interested in how he felt about it. And because it was not interested in him, Lev had never asked himself what he felt about it, at least not until that moment when he sat slack-mouthed on the world’s most uncomfortable sofa in the world’s most unused living room.

And the sad truth was that he didn't feel anything about it at all. For his entire life, Lev had walked in its ways, but he'd never asked himself whether that was, in fact, what he wanted to do. It hadn't occurred to him that he might even form an opinion about observing halacha. He'd behaved like an automaton, performing the repetitive tasks expected of him without question until that moment when he just didn't feel like it.

Lev disliked the lingering sensation—a muffled indifference to the myriad of activities required each day, each hour, by Jewish practice. It might be enough for other Jews to merely tolerate the bustle of being Jewish, but that couldn't ever work for someone like Lev: the product of two decades of intensive Jewish education—cheder, day school, yeshiva high school, a post-high-school year in an Israeli yeshiva—the whole works. He was fluent in Hebrew and Aramaic, well-versed in Torah and Talmud and had excelled in the kind of intensive, comprehensive education in all things Jewish that is supposed to turn out serious young men devoted to performance of the 613 Commandments. And in addition, one had to consider his family's yichus, or pedigree, mostly from his mother's side (his father was a mongrel, Jewishly speaking). “Seventeen generations of rabbis!” his mother would proclaim when Lev or one of his brothers underperformed in religious studies. As she admonished her sons, she would raise her eyes to the framed tintype photograph of her grandparents—her grandfather, Rabbi

Levi, and her grandmother, Rebbetzin Henya—which hung on the wall of the dining room. Lev and his brothers imagined that their great-grandparents supervised them from the photo as the boys did their homework at the dining room table. Lev had examined the photograph many times, mystified by how indistinguishable his great-grandfather was from his great-grandmother. If Rabbi Levi had not been wearing a hat, Lev wouldn't have been able to tell them apart at all.

So to be neutral about Judaism, or worse, not to know how he felt about it, was not an achievement. It was an enormous failure.

Lev was twenty years old and for the first time in his life, he began to question what he was getting out of this all-consuming Jewish enterprise in which he had been raised. He didn't think he was off the derech—at least not like Shloime Strudler—but Lev knew something had happened in that mild encounter with his mother that had bumped him over to the narrow shoulder of the wobbly bridge across the chasm. He suspected that he was veering toward the edge and that if he didn't do something to right his course, he might plummet into the abyss that had no bottom.

Is this a crisis of faith, Lev wondered? He didn't know because he didn't have in his experience any sense of what a crisis of faith felt like, what it did to you. But he did know that the history of the Jews was rife with crises of faith, of people being knocked to the edge of the derech, or in his

case, being nudged toward it. So having a crisis was not the issue. The only question was how you dealt with it. How did you come out of it if you came out of it at all?

3.

Even the Talmud, which featured hundreds of anecdotes about the Sages and the remarkable tenacity of their faith, also contained stories of faith under assault. Lev recalled learning about one in particular in the second chapter of the Talmudic Tractate Kiddushin. There, Rebbe Yaakov was confronted with a conundrum. It is written in the Torah that one should honor one's mother and father in order that your days will be lengthened and in order that it would be good for you. And in another place, the Torah declares that before taking fledgling birds from a nest, it is an obligation that you chase away the mother bird so she does not witness your taking her young; again, in order that it will be good for you and your days will be lengthened. In Tractate Kiddushin, the Talmud reports:

A father once sent his son on an errand, saying to him, 'Go up to the tower and bring me chicks.' And the son, in furtherance of the commandment to honor his father, ascended the tower; there, in furtherance of the commandment to chase away a mother bird before taking its young, the son chased away the mother bird and took the

fledgling birds. But as he returned to his father, he fell from the height and died. And Rebbe Yaakov asked: ‘Where is the promised “lengthening” of the son’s days? Where is the “good” promised for the son?’

The quandary that Rebbe Yaakov confronted was so profound that the esteemed Elisha ben Abuya, when he learned of it, could not reconcile the contradictions. How could it be that a heartfelt effort to obey God’s commandments results in an early death? And particularly so when the commandment itself promises a good life and many years? What kind of a God demands obedience, promises a reward and then annihilates you? Elisha ben Abuya could not answer these questions and so, the Talmud discloses, he went out and sinned. He abandoned his faith and embraced alien ideologies, and thus he became known as Aher: the Other.

And what about Rebbe Yaakov, who had actually witnessed the tragic event? He doubled down on his faith. He concluded that there is, in fact, no reward in this world for the observance of God’s will. The only reward is after death. Rebbe Yaakov declared: Of all those commandments that are written in the Torah along with their reward, not one of them will yield its reward until the Resurrection of the Dead.

So, Lev reflected, the same crisis of faith pushed one great rabbi away from God, and at the same time, drew another closer.

The rabbis say that one is permitted to drink a bottle of kosher wine if the cork has not previously been removed. But if the cork has been pulled and you don't know who pulled it or when, the wine is then forbidden to be drunk by a Jew because the wine could have been used for libations to false gods or in ceremonies devoted to idol worship—indeed, for the most depraved purposes. It must be true, Lev concluded, because once his mother asked her question, “Since when has being Jewish anything to do with how you feel?” the seal was broken and the cork was drawn.