

## Separation | *Prishut* | פְּרִישׁוּת

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*Strengthen yourself so that you can stop lewd thoughts.*

*Draw close to your spouse only when your mind is free, occupied only with thoughts of fulfilling your conjugal duties and procreating.<sup>1</sup>*

The impulses of the animal spirit were created for a worthy purpose; to assist the weaker intellectual spirit to express its desires — including the desire for coition which is the most intense and strongest of the desires and love that exist between people. Our early Sages, who formulated the blessings that are to be recited before deriving any pleasure in this world, gave expression to the intensity of this love and its precious nature in the blessing which is recited at marriage which includes references to joy, gladness, love and brotherhood.

At first, this love was created primarily so that people would fulfill the obligation to procreate. But God sanctified humans even further by designating that every woman should have a specific husband. Because the human children are born frail and fetid, they require care which consists of much effort in order to be nurtured, to be raised and to be trained in the way of the Torah and in the performance of good deeds. God therefore bequeathed us — through this obligation [of marriage] — a double measure of the most wondrous love — a love which is itself formed by a combination of the two strongest ardent forces in creation; the love that a person has for oneself and the love that exists between man and a woman. This combined love can withstand the on-going, heavy burden [of raising children] for many days and years, until it finds further, precious reinforcement in the love that children show their parents when they support them in their old age.

But this love [between man and woman] is also susceptible to serious afflictions, like the others we have previously mentioned. It can lead to theft and blood-shed. It can cause abhorrent, chronic diseases. Because the root of all of these illnesses is mired within one of man's most intense desires, the trait of separation is therefore one of the most difficult to inculcate.

Nevertheless, as strong as this desire is at the apex of its assertiveness, in most cases its onset is hardly perceptible. In totality, it can be seen as being comprised of four stages: 1) conception, 2) gestation, 3) birth, and 4) growth. The first stage is marked by succumbing to these thoughts when they come upon one suddenly and unexpectedly. The second stage is marked by indulging in these thoughts and allowing them to increase one's

desire. The third stage is marked by his manifesting the existence of these thoughts through one's words and actions. The fourth stage is marked by one's thoughts leading one to places where one can indulge in sin.

The stage of conception [i.e., when a person first begins to think lewd thoughts] is generally brought about by the associative thought process over which one has no control. As our Sages said (*Otzar HaMidrashim*<sup>2</sup>): *There are three things which one cannot completely escape every day — and one of them is lewd thoughts.* Thus, one can only protect oneself as regards the following three stages: gestation, birth and growth. The person who is utilizing this discipline must be quick to abort this fetus while it is gestating by immediately engaging one's mind in some kind of productive thought process, reinforced by one's trait of decisiveness and one's rejection of the characteristic of idleness. Once a person has been successful in introducing a new thought, one will find it easier to discontinue one's lewd thoughts by seeking further assistance from the trait of order — specifically through the latter part of its summary statement: "Let your thoughts always be free to deal with that which lies ahead of you." Our Sages said (*Kiddushin* 30b<sup>3</sup>): *If this wretch [the yetzer ha-ra] has accosted you, drag him into the study hall.* This is a most cogent piece of advice, for it is immediately applicable since the words of Torah surround us at all times and in all places.

However, even if person were careless and did not manage to abort these thoughts while they were still gestating, and they have been born and have begun to grow, one can still vanquish them by making the summary statement of the trait of equanimity somewhat stricter. If in spite of all this, one succumbs to one's desires once or twice or three times, at least one still retains the traces of his desire to overcome them.

Therefore, one must cleave to God and be embraced by the mercy which God shows to one who desires to be purified, so that one might gird oneself with the strength to persist in this war [with his inclination], using all of the strategies available with no interruption whatsoever. A person's heart should be confident that within but a few years one will merit that one's spiritual illnesses will be cured, that one will be blessed and that one's end will be good.

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Rabbi Mendel of Satanov. (1845). *Chesbon ha-Nefesh*. (D. Landesman, trans.) Feldheim Publishers, New York, 1995. Pages 176-181.

*End notes added.*

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<sup>1</sup> Note: Ramchal has a different view of the middah of Separation/ *Prishut*. See chapters 13, 14, and 15 of his *Mesillat Yesharim*.

<sup>2</sup> The *Otzar HaMidrashim* is the text of the Chumash surrounded by Chazal's Midrashim clarifying and explaining the passages. Chazal is an acronym for the Hebrew "Chachameinu Zichronam Livracha," literally "our sages of blessed memory."

<sup>3</sup> The relevant paragraph in *Kiddushin* 30b reads:

The School of R. Ishmael taught: My son, if this repulsive [wretch] [The Evil Desire] assail thee, lead him to the schoolhouse: if he is of stone, he will dissolve; if iron, he will shiver [into fragments], for it is said: Is not my word like as fire? saith the Lord,' and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces? [Jeremiah 23: 29] If he is of stone, he will dissolve, for it is written: *Ho, everyone that thirsteth, come ye to the waters;* [Isaiah 54:1; i.e., the Torah.] and it is said: *The waters wear the stones* [ Job 14:19].