

## Eshet Yifat Toar: The Balance Between Principle and Human Nature

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This week's parsha begins with the strange law of the *Eshet Yifat Toar*, where a man is allowed to sleep with and marry a gentile woman he captures in war, assuming he meets certain ritual requirements. This law is incredibly strange, and does not seem to jive well with the Torah's general value system. For this reason, Rashi<sup>1</sup> quotes the gemara<sup>2</sup> that makes a startling assertion: “לא דבַּרְה תוֹרָה אֶלָּא כַּנְגִיד יֵצֶר הָרַע”, “the Torah only said this in response to the evil inclination”.

While many of us may be familiar with this Rashi, its implications are truly astounding. What Rashi is telling us is that this law does NOT reflect the Torah's and God's morality. God does not really want us to do this, but this law is a concession to human weakness.

As far as I know, the idea that a law in the Torah is not something God actually desires, and is not something God actually finds moral, is an idea without parallel in Chazal.

This idea is certainly a very slippery slope. The freedom to apply this idea can quickly lead to a system of morals totally divorced from the Torah, where any time an idea in the Torah does not fit into our own sense of morality, we can simply mark it as a concession to human weakness. However, this did not stop many from extending this principle to other ideas. Rav Yosef Albo<sup>3</sup> extended this to the permissibility of consuming meat, Rav Kook extended this to the commandment to wipe out Amalek, Rambam extended this to many Mitvot, most famously Korbanot<sup>4</sup>, and I have heard modern people extend this to slavery as well.

While the debate on how far to extend this principle is fascinating, regardless of whether this is a lone example, or a larger principle underlying several mitzvot, there is an enormous takeaway, and a lesson that we can apply to our own lives.

Offentimes in life, we feel that we must stick to our principles, no matter what. And this is an important instinct, and often correct. Our principles are important, and we should not be willing to easily compromise on them.

However, the lesson from *Eshet Yifat Toar* is that sometimes our principles come into conflict with human weakness, and the correct solution is to find a middle ground, even if doing so can feel wrong or off.

This can manifest itself in many ways. To give an interpersonal example, when fighting with a friend, even if we know we are fully right, we should take their own human weaknesses into account and try to find a compromise. However, the lesson can perhaps most potently be applied to ourselves. When working on ourselves, if we spot an area of weakness that we want

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<sup>1</sup> Devarim 21:11

<sup>2</sup> Kiddushin 21b

<sup>3</sup> Sefer Halkkarim, Maamar 3 15

<sup>4</sup> Guide for the Perplexed 3:32

to improve on, there is often a strong urge, the urge of principle, to immediately fully address the problem. But that is not human nature. If we try to take too large a step in our self improvement, what often happens is the change is too difficult, and we end up where we started. What we learn from *Eshet Yifat Toar* is that if we want to improve ourselves, we can only ignore human nature at our own peril. We must take small gradual steps, and over time we will get to our goals. May we all be blessed to appropriately apply this principle, both in our interpersonal lives and in our own internal struggles.