Parashat Vayakhel - The Taming of Desire

1. Rashi

The womenfolk of Israel had mirrors which they used when they beautified themselves with cosmetics. When the women offered these mirrors as gifts for the Mishkan, Moses’ immediate reaction was to reject them as they were made for the “yetzer hara” (i.e. for sexual purposes - to make themselves beautiful and endear them to their husbands.) God told him ‘Accept them! - These are dearer to me than all the other gifts! - because it was due to these mirrors that these women brought myriads (Tzevaot) into the world when they were in Egypt.’

When their husbands were engaged in backbreaking labour they would go to see their husbands, bringing with them provisions of food and drink. They would eat together and then they would hold up the mirrors together and would see themselves in the mirror. She would tease him saying - ‘I am more good looking than you’ and in this way they would seduce their husbands... and had children....and these are those mirrors (mar’ot hatzov’ot)”

2. Ibn Ezra - Perush Ha’aroch

Women habitually look in the mirror - made of copper or glass - every morning to put their headdress into shape. .... Now, amongst the Israelites were certain women, dedicated to the service of God, who distanced themselves from worldly desire. They donated their mirrors to the Mishkan, as they had no further use for beautification. These women would come each day to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting to pray and to hear the details of the mitvot.”

3. Death of the Yetzer Hara

They sat fasting for three days and three nights, and it was handed over to them. It departed from the Holy of Holies as a fiery lion-cub. The prophet [Zekharya] said to Israel: "This is the inclination for idolatry," as it is written, "And he said: 'This is the wickedness'" (Zekharya 5:8).

As they grabbed hold of it, one of its hairs fell out; it raised its voice and the sound carried four hundred parasangs (1400 miles).

They said: "What should we do? Perhaps, God forbid, they might have mercy upon him from heaven."

The prophet said to them: "Cast it into a pot of lead and close its opening with lead — for lead muffles the sound — as it is written, 'And he said: 'This is the wickedness.' And he cast it down into the basket, and he cast the lead weight upon its opening'" (Zekharya 5:8).
They said: "Since this is a time of grace, let us ask for mercy regarding the inclination for [sexual] sins." They asked for mercy, and it was handed over to them. It said to them: "Realize that if you kill me, the world will be finished." They imprisoned it for three days, but when they then looked in the entire land of Israel for a fresh egg, they could not find one. They said: "What should we do? Should we kill it? The world will be finished. Should we ask for mercy on a portion? They do not grant halves in heaven." They blinded its eyes and let it go. This helped, in that people are no longer tempted by their relatives.  

(Yoma 69b)

4. Use for Good

A person is obligated to bless the bad things as one blesses the good as it says, "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6). "With all your heart" - with both your inclinations - the good inclination and the "bad" (Mishna Berachot ch.9)

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When God engraved and carved out the world, he did not entirely eradicate the chaos and the void, the deep, the darkness, from the domain of His creation. Rather, he separated the complete, perfect existence from the forces of negation, confusion, and turmoil and set up cosmic boundaries, eternal laws to keep them apart. Now Judaism affirms the principle of creation out of absolute nothingness. Therefore, the chaos and the void, the deep, the darkness, and relative nothingness must all have been fashioned by the Almighty before the creation of the orderly, majestic, beautiful world.

... However, the forces of relative nothingness at times exceed their bounds. They wish to burst forth out of the chains of obedience that the Almighty imposed upon them and seek to plunge the earth back into chaos and the void. It is only the law that holds them back and bars the path before them.