Talmud Brachot Top Ten Teachings, Daf 61:

1. **The two inclinations.** Rav Nachman bar Rav Chisda teaches: In the verse “G-d created Adam,” why does the word *vayitzer* (created) have two *yud’s*? This teaches us that G-d created two inclinations, the Good Inclination and the Evil Inclination. Rabbi Nachman bar Yitzchak challenges this teaching, because we do not see the same double *yud* by the creation of animals, and don’t animals also have two inclinations? Surely they have an Evil Inclination, as they sometimes bite and kick. But maybe that’s just how animals are. In fact, our Evil Inclination is often viewed as animalistic, suggesting that it’s simply the nature of animals to follow these baser instincts. However, the gemara in Bava Basra discusses a “normal” ox vs. a “habituated” ox. The habituated ox is one that has become habituated to act in a way that is not normal for an ox. Eating is normal for an ox. Goring people is not. In other words, there is a natural way that animals generally behave, but sometimes an animal behaves in an abnormal way and causes harm. When this happens, we might say that the animal is following its Evil Inclination. So there is a battle even within animals between the two inclinations, though it is not as strong as the battle within humans.
2. **No way to win.** Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi gives a different explanation for the two *yud*’s in the word *vayitzer*: “Woe is to me from my Creator and woe is to me from my Evil Inclination.” Rashi explains this to mean, “Woe is to me from my Creator” – if I follow my Evil Inclination. “Woe is to me from my Evil Inclination” – if I do not give it to it, because it will drive me crazy with thoughts. When we give in to the Evil Inclination, there is a part of us that knows we’ve done something wrong, something that goes against what G-d wants from us, and we feel guilty for letting down our Creator. But if we don’t give in to the Evil Inclination, the struggle will only continue. The Evil Inclination doesn’t simply give up when a person does the right thing. Instead it hounds him, torturing his thoughts and trying to make him regret his actions. “Woe is to me” either way – either we sin and end up drowning in guilt or we evade sin and cannot escape our torturous regrets. Ben Yehoyada explains Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi’s statement differently, saying that sometimes even a mitzvah can be a trick by the Evil Inclination, because sometimes when we do a mitzvah it makes us feel superior to others. When it makes us too prideful, a mitzvah can actually become a sin. Woe is to the person whose Evil Inclination fooled him into doing a mitzvah and becoming too prideful.

The Tanya talks about two souls, the Divine soul and the animal soul. The Divine soul is the source of the Good Inclination, and the animal soul is the source of the Evil Inclination. Rabbi Ashlag says the Divine soul is the desire to give, while the animal soul is the desire to take.

1. **Male and female.** Others learn a completely different lesson from the two *yud’*s in *vayitzer*: that Adam and Eve were originally created as one being. G-d created a male and a female human at the same time, equal to each other, and their bodies were attached. This explains the verse, “back to front You have created me.” Rav says that when G-d put Adam to sleep, He didn’t take just one of his ribs and turn it into a new person. Rather, he detached Eve, who was already a whole second being, from Adam’s body. According to the Arizal, Adam and Eve represented the potential of all souls that would eventually come out of them. But they were an early stage of humanity that specifically needed to be united before they could be separated. Because they hadn’t yet gone through *tikkunim* (rectifications), they were vulnerable to the forces of darkness, and therefore their backs had to be connected as a safeguard. Before they could be split, they had to strengthen certain processes of their vessels.
2. **The more popular story.** Of course, we know there is another opinion about the creation of Adam and Eve: Adam was created alone, and then G-d took his rib and turned it into Eve. The removal of Adam’s rib left a wound, and G-d then filled his flesh back in. From this we learn that saving one person’s life is like saving the whole world. One life is worth the world. We also learn from this account of Creation that though it is important to find your *zivug*, your soulmate, each person is an individual. You don’t exist only in relation to other people, and your whole life shouldn’t be only about being half of a couple. You exist on your own, as a whole person. This balance between individuality and partnership is complicated and deserves deeper attention. On the one hand, each person is an individual and should have a healthy sense of self. We each exist on our own and it is important to understand our individual significance. But on the other hand, we were also created with the potential to find another person, a soulmate, to help complete us in a way that we can never be complete alone. With this partner, we can so to speak reunite Adam and Eve.
3. **Resolving conflicting stories.** So which is it – did G-d create Adam and Eve together, or did He first create Adam and then create Eve out of his body? Perhaps in a way both are true. G-d’s original intention was to create Adam and Eve together, but in actuality He ended up creating Adam first. How could this be? The gemara in Rosh Hashana records a debate between Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Yehoshua about when the world was created. Did it happen in Nissan or in Tishrei? Tosfos there says it could be that G-d wanted to create the world at one time, but actually created it at the other time. Because each month represents something different. Nissan represents G-d redeeming us from the darkness of Egyptian slavery. Tishrei is the month of judgment. G-d wanted to create the world using pure judgment, but He ultimately tempered it with mercy. But because Tishrei, the month of judgment, was the original intention, the energy of Tishrei is still contained in the Creation that ultimately happened in Nissan. We can understand the creation of Adam and Eve in a similar way. G-d’s intention was to create both together, because ultimately we are meant to be equal. But while that is the ideal, and some of that energy is contained in Creation, it is not what ended up happening. In reality, G-d created Adam first, perhaps because it was necessary for man to take the lead for a time before the ideal of equality could be achieved.
4. **Preparing and beautifying Eve. “**And He brought her to Adam” – Rabbi Yirmiya ben Elazar says this teaches us that G-d was like the best man or the maid of honor for Adam and Eve’s wedding. He took it upon Himself to arrange the details. We learn from this that even a great man should never say, “Who is this plain person that I should take care of them at their wedding?” No one is greater than G-d, but He took care of Adam and Eve, who were so much lower than Him, at their wedding. “And G-d built Eve” – according to the opinion that she was already fully formed, this verse means that G-d beautified her for Adam. Making Eve beautiful for her wedding to Adam was apparently worth G-d’s time. Perhaps He was imbuing her with some mystical Divine element, representing the noble quality that G-d gives to a woman, especially a bride, that makes a man desire her.
5. **Good, evil, and in-between**. It was taught in the name of Rabbi Yosi Hagligi: The righteous are judged by their Good Inclination, as the verse says, “and my heart is void within me.” The wicked are judged by their Evil Inclination, as the verse says, “in my heart evil speaks, saying let there be no fear of G-d before me." This verse is about a person who doesn’t feel regret over violating G-d’s will. Then there is the in-between person, who is judged by both the Good and the Evil Inclinations, as the verse says, “G-d stands to the right of him to save him from those who judge his soul.” Rava says we are in-between people. Abaye says to him, “if people like you are in-between, what about the rest of us – we must all be wicked!” The first book of the Alter Rebbe’s Tanya discusses what makes someone righteous, wicked, or in-between. A righteous person, a *tzaddik*, is someone who is completely good. A wicked person, a *rasha*, is anyone who has done any bad thing and hasn’t yet atoned. The in-between person, the *beinoni*, is one who does everything right but who unconsciously has inappropriate thoughts that he does not dwell on but cannot stop. This type of person has two “judges” who each try to influence him – the Good Inclination and the Evil Inclination. He needs help from G-d for the Good Inclination to win the fight. The Good Inclination is more connected to the mind, and the Evil Inclination is more connected to the heart. The two are constantly engaged in battle, but the *beinoni* exerts self-control and learns to use his mind to control his heart. *Beinoni* is actually a very high level that we should all hope to achieve, and that is why Rava considered himself to be a *beinoni*.
6. **The two extremes.** Rava says the world was created only for completely wicked and completely righteous people. Rav says, more specifically, the world was only created for Ahab, the wicked king who was married to the wicked Jezebel, and for Chanina ben Dosa, who caused miracles with his prayers and who sustained himself only with some carobs while the whole world got its sustenance in his merit. If you want to grab this world completely, to get everything you can out of it, you need to be like Ahab, fully evil and willing to do anything to get what you want. If you want to be completely good, you need to be like Chanina ben Dosa, willing to forgo every worldly thing other that what you need for basic survival. But what about the rest of us, who live normal lives? We take some things from this world but we do not give up our humanity entirely in the pursuit of pleasure. In his introduction to the Zohar, The Baal Hasulam Rabbi Ashlag says that inherent in Creation is a desire to receive. A child is selfish, unable to think about the needs of other people. As we age, our desires grow beyond basic things like food, but that inherent selfishness remains. But as we mature spiritually, we also develop a desire to give. We learn to want to do things for other people. This brings us closer to the Divine, because while the desire of the created is to receive, the desire of the Creator is to give. The goal of Creation is for human beings to transition from the desire to receive to the desire to give. When you make that transition correctly, you will not want to receive just for yourself; you will only want to receive what you can use to give others. Chanina ben Dosa was the epitome of the desire to give, while Ahab was the epitome of the desire to receive. The rest of us fall somewhere in the middle. We still have the desire to receive, but we must strive to transform ourselves into givers.
7. **The fox and the fish.** The Romans decreed that Jews could not teach Torah. A man named Papas ben Yehuda saw that Rabbi Akiva was endangering his life by continuing to have big public gatherings to teach Torah, and he asked Rabbi Akiva, “Aren’t you afraid of Rome?” Rabbi Akiva answered him with a parable: A fox was walking along the river and he saw fish darting around in the water. He asked the fish, “Why are you running?” and they answered, “We’re trying to avoid being caught by the fishermans’ nets.” The fox said, “Why don’t you just come up here to live with me on dry land?” The fish responded, “They say you’re the cleverest of the animals, but really you are a fool. If even in the water, the place of our lives, we are afraid of being caught and killed, certainly on dry land, the place of our deaths, we know we would not survive.” The Torah is our life and the length of our days, explained Rabbi Akiva. It’s true that studying it puts our lives in danger, but if we stop studying it we will be leaving the place of our lives, and surely we will stand no chance. A little while later both men were caught and put in jail. Papas ben Yehuda said to Rabbi Akiva, “Woe is to me and blessed and fortunate are you. You were caught for teaching Torah, while I was caught for insignificant things.”

The fox in the parable represents the nations of the world. They tell us to stop being so different, to just give up and assimilate. The water, meanwhile, represents a universe of things that are there but are not seen. The fish represents a way of being that is permeated by another level of consciousness that those on dry land are not even aware of. That is why the fox could not understand the fish at all. People think Judaism is just an identity, but they are wrong. The Torah takes us beneath the surface of what things are to a whole different spiritual reality. Even if it is not safe, we want to be on that level where we’re submerged in the dimension of Divine existence. Papas ben Yehuda was a good man who was in jail for a good deed, because he took the blame for something he didn’t do in order to save Jews from being killed. But Rabbi Akiva was on a completely different level, and only he saw this other level of reality that Papas ben Yehuda didn’t understand.

1. **Rabbi Akiva’s final hour.** When Rabbi Akiva was taken to be executed, it was the time for reciting the Shema. While they were torturing him, combing his flesh with iron combs, he was receiving G-d’s kingship upon himself. His students asked how he could be thinking about G-d while being tortured. He said to them, “All of my life I’ve been bothered by the verse ‘with all of your hearts, all of your soul, and all of your money.’ I always wondered if I would truly be able to serve G-d with all of my soul, to give up my life for Him. Now that it’s come before me, should I not do this?” He was saying the Shema and he elongated the last word, “*echad*, (One)” until his soul departed. A Heavenly voice said, “Praiseworthy are you, Rabbi Akiva, that your soul went out *be’echad*.“ An angel asked G-d, “Is this the Torah and is this its reward?” G-d responded, “Their portion is eternal life.” Another Heavenly voice said, “Fortunate are you, Rabbi Akiva, that you are invited to go straight to Heaven.” Though the Romans tortured and executed Rabbi Akiva, they did not manage to kill him. His soul literally left his body because of how much he loved G-d with his whole soul. Chassidic texts explain the deaths of Nadav and Avihu in a similar way, though in that case it was not a good thing. They were trying to get close to G-d, and they didn’t have a desire to be held in this physical world. When Ben Azai, Elisha ben Avuya, Ben Zoma, and Rabbi Akiva entered Pardes, Rashi says that Ben Azai saw G-d and died. Rabbi Akiva didn’t see as much at that point and was able to leave Pardes safely, but now at his execution he was ready to see G-d and stop living. He wasn’t just a martyr, murdered by the Romans. He had the highest death a person can have, in a state of Divine unity. He died seeing G-d’s Oneness and sanctifying His name. This is why Rabbi Akiva is the source of Torah Shebe’al Peh. He was able to expound on things that even Moses didn’t understand, because on some level he surpassed Moses.