

Reader's Guide

For *The Evil Inclination*, a Novel

A jumping-off point for discussion of themes, plot, character development, etc.

Warning: spoilers ahead!

1. Both Lev and Angela begin the novel as stereotypes of their respective backgrounds. Lev is the devout, prudish and dutifully observant Jew; Angela is the brassy, seductive and insistent Italian kid from Bensonhurst. How does the novel whittle away, and ultimately tear down these stereotypes?
2. During their first encounter, Angela mocks Lev's first name, and throughout the novel, she often intentionally mangles the pronunciation of his last name, calling him "Levinski" instead of "Livitski". What role do names play in the novel? At the end of the novel, how does Angela's insistence that Lev call her by her new name, Sarah—and Lev's resistance to doing so—reflect their struggle?
3. Angela seems fixated on avoiding discovery by friends and family of her relationship with Lev. What motivates her to "violate the rules" and drag Lev to Nino's pizza joint in Brooklyn?
4. Why does Angela fear homeless people? What does it say about her feelings toward her family and about who she is?
5. Angela and Lev have very different attitudes toward the use of profanity. Angela uses it frequently and Lev does not—except once, in chapter 54 when he thinks but does not utter the c-word. What accounts for these different attitudes? How has Lev changed to the extent that he finally succumbs to using a word that he finds so repellent?
6. At the wedding of Lev's cousin, which Angela crashes, Angela is transfixed by the festivities, particularly Lev's dancing, and she insists that Lev have sex with her in the parking lot. What impels Angela to seduce Lev at that moment? What effect does the experience have on Lev?
7. In chapter 42, Angela says angrily to Lev: "You just keep [your emotions and resentments] inside of you, where they can't get out. They sit there and build up. You know why? Because you're afraid of them! You're afraid of letting them out, of seeing

them for what they are. That's why you have all those rules and laws to follow—to keep you in line, to keep you from feeling what is really going on inside of you.” Is Angela right? Or is she simply justifying the dysfunctionality of her family? Is it a virtue to routinely express bottled up emotions to one's family?

8. At the end of the novel, Lev thinks about his past with Angela and says to himself: “there is forgiveness for everything except for one thing—betrayal. Betrayal is the one thing for which there is no forgiveness.” What are Lev's acts of “betrayal”, as opposed to his “sins”?
9. Does Lev love Angela? If he does, then why does he lie to her about the Talmudic story of the yeshiva student and the four-hundred dinar harlot? When Lev's mother unexpectedly endorses marriage to Jewish converts, why doesn't Lev use the opportunity to convince her to support his future marriage to Angela?
10. Does Angela love Lev? At the end of the novel, does *Sarah* love Lev? Does she hate him?
11. Does Angela bear some responsibility for the disastrous breakup with Lev? If so, what were her missteps in the relationship?
12. Discuss whether you think Angela will succeed in her new persona as Sarah in the haredi world, or whether this is merely her attempt to come to terms with losing Lev.
13. What happens to Lev? Does he find his way back to the *derech* in the future or, as he fears, is he lost forever?

Questions focused on Jewish themes in the novel:

Dive deeper into Jewish themes and content.

14. As a youngster, Lev conceives of the “*derech*”—the path of Orthodox Jewish observance—as “a bridge so high that its terminus was obscured by swirling clouds; above a chasm so deep that its floor could not be perceived.” Is this conception simplistic? How does this all-or-nothing concept of halacha contribute to Lev's missteps? Do you think there is such a thing as a “*derech*”—one path for adherence to Jewish

obligations and Jewish observance, as opposed to many paths?

15. What do the Talmudic passages that demarcate the sections of the novel reveal about the rabbinic attitude towards sexual desire—the Evil Inclination of the title?
16. Throughout the novel, Lev is in sporadic conversation with the Talmud and the rabbis who are quoted in it—a conversation that takes place whether he likes it or not. What do the Talmudic sages say to him about his desire for Angela?
17. In the final chapter of the novel, Lev reflects as follows: “No, Lev concluded, his decline had begun the afternoon after their ludicrous first date, when he had invoked Rambam to bless his Evil Inclination to consort with the daughter of an idol-worshipper; when Lev refused to take responsibility for the decision he had already made.” He is suggesting that his fundamental error was not surrendering to his desire for Angela; rather, his error was justifying his actions by deluding himself that Rambam would permit him to do so. Is Lev correct that his evading responsibility was his undoing? Would the Sages agree with him based on the Talmudic passages quoted in the novel?
18. In chapter 20, as Angela seduces Lev for the first time, he speculates as follows: “On the other hand, didn’t Rebbe Yitzchak say in Tractate *Berachos* that if a man saw a woman’s flesh just four finger-breadths in size, it is as if he has seen her entire nakedness? And on the same page, didn’t Rav Sheishess say that if a man gazes at even the little finger of a woman, it’s as if he has gazed at her place of nakedness?” What does this passage say about the attitude of the Sages towards sexual desire? Are they just being prudish, or are they recognizing the power and the pervasiveness of sexual desire?
19. A Talmudic passage at part IV recounts the misadventures of Rav Amram the Pious, who struggles with his desire for a beautiful Jewish woman redeemed from captivity. In the final chapter, Rav Amram is evoked again in counterpoint to Lev’s failed struggle to resist his Evil Inclination. How was Rav Amram’s reaction to desire different than Lev’s?
20. Angela understands very early in her relationship with Lev that intermarriage is simply out of the question for him, which is why she begins to explore conversion as she contemplates a shared future with Lev. The novel makes clear the traditional Rabbinic attitude toward converts—that they are held in high regard, equal to or greater in status to those born Jewish. Yet Lev’s attitude toward converts, which he is convinced his parents and grandmother share, is far from the aspirational welcoming attitude articulated by the Rabbis. Where does this bias against converts come from? Do you share some of the same feelings? Have you been the victim of such bias?