

PARASHAT B'RESHIT



עץ החיים ועץ הדעת (1)

The Trees of Life and Knowledge (1)

■ Good and Evil

Some of the events recounted in Parashat B'reshit raise very difficult questions, zeroing in on the most complex issues man can think of. The solutions to some of them, most interestingly, appear precisely at the other end of the Torah.

Let us consider, for instance, the challenging issue of the Tree of Knowledge, the fruit of which G-d told Adam and Chava (Eve) not to eat. What was the nature of this tree? Was it really so wondrous that it actually granted anyone who ate from it the elevated status of being “*like G-d, knowing good and evil?*” (B'reshit 3,5) How could it possibly be that consuming a simple fruit could raise even an ignoramus to the levels of the Divine? Is it conceivable that years and decades of Torah study and hard work on one's character aimed at truly understanding what is right and what is wrong, could be so easily replaced by the simple trick of eating a fruit?!

Maimonides raises another, similar difficulty. In his classic *Guide to the Perplexed*, he negates the possibility that before Adam ate from the Tree of Knowledge, he was as ignorant as an animal and could not distinguish between good and bad – for if so, how could he have been commanded by G-d? How could G-d have even spoken with such an ignorant man? And, we may add, how could this “simpleton” Adam be charged with the task of assigning appropriate names to the animals of the world?

The solution to these questions appears at the end of the Torah, in Parashat Nitzavim:

רֵאָה נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַיּוֹם אֶת הַחַיִּים וְאֶת הַטּוֹב וְאֶת הַמָּוֶת וְאֶת הָרָע.

*Behold, I have given before you today life and good,
and death and evil.* (D'varim 30,15)

This verse specifies all four of the central elements that comprise the Tree of Knowledge/Tree of Life axis in B'reshit: life and death, good and evil. The next verse in Nitzavim tells us how the Trees of Life and Knowledge, in their truest sense, are manifest in practice:

אֲשֶׁר אֶנְכִּי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם לְאַהֲבָה אֶת ה' אֱ-לֹהֶיךָ...
וּלְשֹׂמֵר מִצְוֹתַי וְחֻקֹּתַי וּמִשְׁפָּטַי וְחַיֵּית וְרִבִּית...

*... that which I command you today, to love Hashem your G-d...
and to keep His commandments and laws,
and you will live and multiply... (verse 16)*

The meaning is quite clear: Listening to Hashem and His laws is the **good**, and the consequence is **life**. Conversely, disobeying Hashem and His laws is the **bad**, and the consequence thereof is **death** – as the Torah continues:

וְאִם יִפְנֶה לְבָבְךָ וְלֹא תִשְׁמָע... הִגַּדְתִּי לָכֶם הַיּוֹם כִּי אֶבֶד תֵּאבְדוּן...

*And if your heart strays and you do not listen... I have informed
you today that you will surely be destroyed... (verses 17-18)*

As such, we see that the forbidden trees in the Garden of Eden do not have magical fruit, but are rather normal, regular trees just like all others. Our Sages said the following about the Tree of Knowledge:

What type of tree did Adam eat from? R. Meir said it was a vine... R.

Nechemiah said it was a fig tree... R. Yehuda said it was a wheat stalk.

(B'rachot 40a)

As an aside, R. Yehuda explains his opinion that it was a wheat stalk by saying: "A child does not know how to call his mother and father until he tastes grain." What he means is that until a child eats regular food, he knows only his mother, via her milk. Only when he eats wheat or other grain does he come to know the hard work his father does in the fields, day in and day out, each year anew; fruit trees grow every year on their own. Thus, eating grain is the sign of recognition of one's father.

In short, all agree that the Tree of Knowledge was a regular fruit tree. The ban on eating its fruit thus has nothing to do with any wondrous qualities it may have in magically imparting knowledge. The good and evil of this tree is of a different sort altogether. It is actually a "test" tree, via which it will be known if Adam chose the path of good, or that of evil.

It is the very act of obeying Hashem and not eating from it, in accordance with His command, that is the **good** we are seeking – and it is the act of disobedience and eating from it that is the **bad**.

The Tree of Knowledge does not grant knowledge. On the contrary, it is designed only for those who already have knowledge and who know how to differentiate between good and bad. Similarly, the Tree of Life is not a tree that grants life. It was rather created only for those who have merited eternal life.

■ The Evil Serpent

What is the source of the nearly universal misconception regarding this matter? Where did we get the false idea that eating the fruit itself imbues the eater with Divine knowledge of good and evil? The answer is: from the snake. The snake distorted G-d's command and had Adam and Chava believe that the Divine prohibition against eating the fruit was rooted in its "wondrous ability" to give over Divine knowledge. This is what the serpent told Chava: *"For G-d knows that when you eat from it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like G-d, knowing good and evil."* (B'reshit 3,5)

When Adam and Chava hear the praise of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge as that which miraculously opens the gates of wisdom and raises people to a status of the Divine, they are immediately faced with a major question: "Then why did G-d forbid us to eat it? Doesn't He want us to grow and advance?" With this question planted in their minds by the snake, they begin to feel that G-d's objective is simply to keep them from being like Him and ensure that they remain inferior!

"Every artisan hates his fellow artisans," the serpent preaches, according to our classic commentator Rashi, "and G-d does not want any competitors among these new flesh-and-blood mortals!" These are, of course, words of heresy and evil, yet Chava allowed herself to hear them and fall into the snake's trap. She looks up at the tree, sees the enticing and appealing fruit, and the next step is practically inevitable: *"She took from the fruit and ate."* (verse 6)

■ Sobering Up, Feeling Shame

Thereupon, *"The eyes of the two of them were opened..."* – but not in the manner in which the wily snake had tricked them into believing. The snake had said, *"Your eyes will be opened and you will be like G-d"* - but what actually happened was that *"their eyes were opened and they knew that they were naked."* (verse 7)

In the moments before one commits a sin, he feels a thrust of passion or a tremendous urge, and his intellect is blinded. But immediately afterwards,

the passion disappears, he “sobers up,” and he feels intense regret. As this process is carried out, he becomes literally ashamed of himself, and he feels the need to “cover up:”

וַיִּתְּפוּרוּ עָלֶיהָ תַּאֲנָה וַיַּעֲשׂוּ לָהֶם חֲגָרֹת.

They sewed a fig leaf and made themselves loincloths. (verse 7)

However, Adam and Chava covered themselves only minimally, and when they soon “*heard G-d’s voice striding in the garden*,” they realized that it was not enough. They now understood that they would have to stand before G-d and explain their actions, and so they felt the need to cover themselves more substantially; they therefore “*hid from G-d in the tree of the garden*” (verse 8). What was the source of this shame?

Feelings of shame stem from immoral behavior. In this case, G-d had taken man and placed him in a true Paradise, allowing him and his wife to eat from all the luscious trees without limitation – except for one: the Tree of Knowledge.¹

Was it really so hard for Adam and Chava to stay away from just one tree, amidst all the many others that were permitted to them?! Could they not do just this one little thing on behalf of Hashem who had given them so much? The realization that they had failed this challenge brought them tremendous shame.

Nevertheless, mortals commonly “overcome” their shame, fail to learn their lesson, and sin again. Hashem felt that this is what might happen, and said:

הֵן הָאָדָם הָיָה כְּאַחַד מִמֶּנּוּ לְדַעַת טוֹב וָרָע,

וַעֲתָהּ פֶּן יִשְׁלַח יָדוֹ וְלָקַח גַּם מִעֵץ הַחַיִּים וְאָכַל וַחַי לְעֹלָם.

*Man has become like one of us, knowing good and bad,
and now, he is liable to take from the Tree of Life as well,
eat and live forever.* (verse 22)

This verse appears to be incomprehensible, in both of its parts:

- Hashem appears to be affirming the words of the snake, that Adam and Chava had in fact become *like G-d in knowing good and evil!*
- Secondly, does Hashem really fear that after He decrees death upon a person, the man could “detour” the Divine decree by snatching a fruit

1. Even the Tree of Life was not forbidden to them at this time; the Torah does not see a need to emphasize this, however, because the decree of death had not yet been introduced into the world.

from the Tree of Life, “forcing” G-d to grant him eternal life? Clearly and obviously, G-d is in control, and does not have to fear any of Adam’s “tricks.”

The verse must therefore be understood as follows:

Man has become [in his own estimation] *like one of us*, [falsely thinking that he] *knows good and bad*. Now, [based on this,] *he is liable to eat from the Tree of Life as well, and* [mistakenly think that he will] *live forever*.

Adam began to believe that by eating from the Tree of Knowledge, he had become like G-d in knowing good and evil. Swayed by the wily serpent, he is very likely to continue to plan his moves regarding the Tree of Life in the same manner. Adam would think as follows: “If eating from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge raises one to a level of Divine knowledge, that must mean that eating from the Tree of Life similarly grants eternal life, just like that of Hashem!” As a result, Adam would also explain to himself the snake’s promise, “*No, you will not die*” (verse 4) as meaning, “It’s all up to you!”

G-d therefore says: “If he in fact eats from the Tree of Life in the mistaken belief that he will never die, he will have no reason to fear death – and no reason to repent! He must therefore not be allowed to eat from that tree, in order to prevent his continued spiritual decline. He must not be permitted to remain in the Garden of Eden, but must rather be given the chance to repent and do *teshuvah*!”

■ To be Like G-d

With his provocative and seducing remarks, promising, “*You will be like G-d*,” the serpent touched upon a hidden aspect of man’s soul: his desire to be very close to Hashem. As King David wrote in Psalms:

וְאֲנִי קִרְבָּת אֶל־לֹהִים לִי טוֹב...

As for me, closeness to G-d is good for me... (Psalms 73,28)

To contrast this, the snake presented a distorted and false picture, implying that the ban on eating of the tree was designed to distance man from the G-d Who knows good and evil. This is how he entrapped Chava.

The objective truth, however, is that it is Hashem’s essential desire to raise man up to be like Him in certain ways, and this is the reason why He granted man - “His choice creation” - the “*image of G-d*” (B’reshit 1,27), also known as Free Will. As is written:

מָה אֱנוֹשׁ כִּי תִזְכְּרוּנוּ וּבֶן אָדָם כִּי תִפְקְדֶנּוּ,
וְתִחַסְרוּהוּ מֵעֵט מַאֲלֵהִים וְכְבוֹד וְהָדָר תַּעֲטִיֶהוּ.

*What is man that you should remember him...
Yet You have made him slightly less than the angels,
and You have crowned him with glory and majesty.* (Psalms 8,5-6)

Furthermore: Hashem did not suffice with creating man – but also gave him a name:

זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָאֵם וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם וַיִּקְרָא אֶת שְׁמֵם אָדָם בְּיוֹם הַבְּרָאָם.
*Male and female He created them, and he blessed them and
called their name “man” on the day of their creation.* (B'reshit 5,2)

“Calling by name” means “assigning a Divine mission.” G-d sets a goal for each person – namely, to be like Him. This is alluded to by the very name Adam: The first and last letters, *aleph* and *mem*, are also the first and last letters of the name of G-d, *Elokim*. And the middle letter of Adam, *dalet*, stands for *dmut* (“image”) or *dimyon* (“similarity”). The message is that we must strive to be like G-d.

The practical application of the above is as the Sage Abba Sha’ul taught in the Gemara: “Be like G-d; just as He is compassionate and merciful, so, too, you should be compassionate and merciful.” (Shabbat 133b)

But it is not the act of eating from a Tree of Knowledge that will bring man to this level. On the contrary: By adhering to G-d’s will and *refraining* from eating from this tree, man will come to be like Hashem. This very basic insight is revealed to us in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 65b), where we find this startling passage:

Rava said: If the righteous would wish to, they could create worlds,
as is written: “*For it is your sins that separate you and your G-d, and
your sins hid [G-d’s] face from you*.” (Yeshayahu 59,2)

In other words, G-d implanted tremendous powers in the man He created – so great that if he were to use them correctly, he would be able to be like G-d and create worlds. But his sins prevent him from doing so; they form a barrier between him and G-d. By listening to Hashem and following His commandments, the barriers are removed. To prove his point, Rava cited an amazing feat he was able to perform, as the Gemara continues:

Rava created a man, and sent him/it to R. Zera. R. Zera spoke to the creature, but the latter did not say a word. R. Zera said to him/it: “Are you really a man like men?! [No!] Return to your dust!”

Rava created a man by joining the letters of G-d's Name together in a particular manner. But the man he created did not have the power of speech. When Rav Zera saw this, he understood that this was a human creation, and certainly not Divine, and so he decreed that the being must return to dust.

By creating such a man and sending him to R. Zera, this great Amoraite Sage had very profound intentions. He wished to show that while the righteous can be partners with Hashem in Creation, there are significant limitations. They have the ability to be like G-d and create worlds and man, but the man thus formed will lack free will and the ability to make independent decisions. He will be controlled by his creator and will have to serve him, just like a golem or a machine.

The difference between righteous men and G-d is that Hashem created man with the ability to oppose Him, with independent thought, and with unhampered free will. Man's very ability to say "No!" to Hashem and disobey Him is the proof that Hashem wants to grant us His Divine image – that is, the ability to be like Him in making decisions independently.

This, then, could have been Adam's retort to the snake! He could have said, "You see, I can make this choice and decide not to adhere to G-d's command – meaning that I have Free Will!"

That is, the snake had tried to convince Adam that Hashem did not want him to have free choice like Hashem, but rather to remain on a low level without independent thought. Adam could have countered: "The very fact that I can decide, if I wish, to eat from the tree shows that I am already on that high level! He wants me to be able to choose!"

In sum, Hashem very much wants man to be like Him in utilizing his free will in an absolute manner without any outside pressure or coercion.

■ The Tree of Life

Just as the fruits of the Tree of Knowledge have no wondrous abilities to grant knowledge, the fruits of the Tree of Life similarly have no magical eternal life-giving qualities. Why, then, is it called the Tree of Life?

The snake would say that it is so named because one who eats from it will live forever. But we have seen that the entire concept of death is connected with eating from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge. Thus, if Adam adheres to G-d's command and does not eat from it, he will live forever. Why, then, do we need the Tree of Life?

Clearly, the Tree of Life is not meant to provide the eater with eternal life. On the contrary: Only he who lives forever may eat from it! It is a tree designated exclusively for those who are living. Before Adam ate from the Tree of Knowledge and was sentenced to death, he was permitted to eat freely from the Tree of Life. The name “Tree of Life” is thus part of the test of the Tree of Knowledge. It gives room for the snake’s lie that just like eating from the Tree of Knowledge brings knowledge of G-d, eating from the Tree of Life will lead to eternal life.

But the truth, as we have learned, is the opposite: Adherence to G-d’s word is the secret of eternal life, and it is also that which grants the Knowledge of Hashem.

■ No Shortcuts

One of the important conclusions from what we have learned is that we must beware of “quick fixes.” The alluring temptation to perform something as easy and fast as eating a fruit in order to reach sublime levels of eternal life and absolute knowledge of good and evil is nothing more than the “snake’s counsel” - that which the evil serpent advised Adam and Chava.

The opposite is true. G-d established a very different way by which to attain great heights. It involves hard work, each and every day over a long period, reining in one’s passions and desires, and making sure to follow G-d’s word. This is the only way to ascend to the level of “closeness to G-d” and the richness of eternal life.

This helps us understand why the only commandment G-d gave Adam was a *lo taaseh*, an instruction *not* to do something, as opposed to a positive command of action. It is because positive acts are one-time affairs, while negative mitzvot are something that we must observe perpetually throughout our entire lifetime.

Each and every day, the forbidden tree stood there in front of Adam; he had to overcome his desire, day in and day out, to eat from it. True service of G-d is a struggle that we must wage every day of our lives.

