

## PARASHAT BEREISHIT

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This shiur is dedicated by Akiva Karalitzky in honor of  
Rabbi and Mrs Aaron Borow

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The Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life  
By Rav Zeev Weitman

One of the most puzzling stories in all of the Torah is the account concerning the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life. God places Adam in the Garden of Eden and causes every tree that is "pleasant to look at and good for food" to grow there for him. In the garden, there are also the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil. God prohibits man from eating from the Tree of Knowledge,[1] warning that on the day he eats from this tree he will die.

As we know, Adam and Chava eat of the Tree of Knowledge, but they do not die on that same day; the Torah records that Adam actually goes on to live to an extraordinarily old age – nearly 1,000 years. It seems, then, that the serpent is correct in responding to the woman with the words:

"You shall not surely die. For God knows that on the day you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (2:4-5)

This leads to another difficulty: as we understand it, the ability to distinguish between good and evil represents an advantage rather than a deficiency. It is therefore not clear why Adam was not created with this ability from the outset. Why did the acquisition of this knowledge need to involve sin and punishment?

A third question is the seeming contradiction between the first and third chapters of Bereishit concerning man's essence and the way in which he resembles God. In chapter 1, we are told that man is created, expressly and deliberately, in God's image:

And God said, "Let us make man in Our image, as Our likeness, that they may have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over the animals, and over all of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created man in His image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

However, in chapter 3, we find that the similarity between man and God has its source in the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge, as the serpent tells the woman, and as God Himself affirms at the end of the chapter:

And the Lord God said, "Behold, man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil..." (3:22)[2]

Furthermore, we must ask, if God did not want man to be able to distinguish between good and evil, for what reason did He plant the Tree of Knowledge in the garden? What was the purpose of this tree in the general scheme of Creation? The same question arises with regard to the Tree of Life: for what reason was it planted, if there was no intention of offering man eternal life?

And a fifth question: If God indeed did not want man to know the difference between good and evil, what prevented Him from simply denying him this ability? God's punishment of the earth, after the sin, was that the earth – which was originally supposed to give forth every type of goodness without the need for any effort – would now produce only thorns and thistles. The punishment for the woman was that her experience of childbirth, which was originally meant to be painless, would now entail sorrow. The snake was punished by henceforth having to go upon its belly. In the same way, surely God could have punished the man with the withdrawal of the ability to distinguish between good and evil, which had been acquired through transgression of God's command.

These questions and others led the Ran (Rabbeinu Nissim) to skip over this chapter, offering no commentary on it. Abravanel explains:

This parasha is explained by some of the commentators in accordance with the plain meaning of the text. This is the path adopted by Rashi and Ramban, and Ibn Ezra also follows this approach in his assertion that the events happened as they are described. The other approach maintains that this story is not to be understood literally, and that none of it actually took place, but that it is altogether allusion and allegory. This is the way that Rambam explains it, and it is also in truth the way of Ibn Ezra, and that is its secret; Ralbag [explains it in this way] too, in his Commentary on the Torah, along with all those who follow their approach and imbibe their teachings... And I think that the questions that arose for Ha-Rav Ha-Chassid, Rabbeinu Nissim [the Ran], led him to avoid explaining this parasha, for he did not have the strength to contend with his colleagues in explaining this parasha in an allegorical manner, and he was unable to explain it in accordance with its literal meaning. So he decided to remain silent on the matter. Therefore, in the commentary which he began on the Torah, he skipped over the parasha, "These are the generations of the heavens and the earth..." up until "And the man knew Chava, his wife," for he feared that the snake would bite him without warning (pen yishkhenu nachash beli lachash). He therefore offered no interpretation of any matter, whether great or small, in the verses of this parasha.[3] And his teacher, Ramban, took a similar course, for although he did not refrain altogether from explaining the parasha, he held himself back in most of the verses, explaining nothing in them.

Indeed, Ramban – one of the greatest commentators on the plain level of the text – deals with only some of the difficult questions posed by our parasha, and even there his explanations fail to provide complete solutions to the difficulties.

On the question of the essence of the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil, Ramban rejects the approach of those commentators who argue that "knowledge of good and evil" refers to the sexual drive, and that it was the eating from the Tree of Knowledge that introduced this desire into man. He points out that the serpent's words indicate that knowledge of good and evil in itself represents some sort of resemblance to God – "and you shall be like the gods, knowing good and evil." We cannot simply interpret the serpent's statement as deception, since God Himself testifies, following the sin, "Behold, man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil".

To Ramban's view, man's original nature led him to do what he was supposed to do – like the heavenly hosts, which operate in accordance with the nature imbued in them at the time of their creation, with no desire or feeling. As a result of eating from the Tree of Knowledge, man acquired the quality of having his own independent will to do things that appeared to him to be good and to avoid doing things that appeared to him to be evil. This will, in a certain sense, is a Divine quality – God acts in accordance with His will – but in another sense it is problematic for man, since having his own inclination, desires, and will interferes with the realization of his natural, Divinely-imbued inherent nature and purpose.

The problem with Ramban's explanation is that it seems to entail a paradox. If, prior to eating from the Tree of Knowledge, man had no independent will and desire and he acted in accordance with his God-given nature, then it is impossible to understand how he could have sinned and eaten from the Tree of Knowledge. In fact, what would be the point of commanding him any sort of command or imposing any sort of prohibition in the first place? Furthermore, the Torah itself testifies, "She saw that the tree was good for food and a delight for the eyes." This seems to indicate that even prior to eating of the fruit, the woman experienced some sort of desire, made some sort of distinction between good and evil, and possessed the ability to act in accordance with her will – even if this entailed going against her nature and the purpose of her creation.

Ramban also talks about the relationship between God's warning that "On the day you eat of it, you will surely die" and the fact that Adam and Chava did not die on the day they ate of the fruit. Ramban cites the view of Chazal that were it not for Adam's sin, he would have been immortal, and that it was the eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge that introduced death. This is the meaning of the punishment, "You shall surely die" – prior to the sin, man was not destined to die at all. Another explanation that Ramban cites is that the warning, "On the day you eat of it, you shall surely die," means "you will be deserving of death" – and God will carry out that punishment at whatever time He sees fit, sometime prior to the originally appointed time for his death.

Both of these explanations offered by Ramban require further explanation.

Chazal's explanation is problematic because it is the Tree of Life that causes man to live forever. Just as prior to eating of the Tree of Knowledge man did not possess the ability to distinguish between good and evil, prior to eating of the Tree of Life he was not immortal. We know that man's expulsion from the Garden of Eden and the positioning of the keruvim at the entrance to the garden are meant to deny him any possibility of eating from the Tree of Life and living forever.

To resolve this difficulty we must posit that man was indeed originally meant to live forever and that it was the eating from the Tree of Knowledge that introduced death and mortality. However, the Tree of Life had the power to repair the damage and corruption caused by eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, restoring man to his original state of immortality. Since God had stipulated that "on the day you eat of it, you will surely die" – in other words, that man would no longer be immortal – his expulsion from the Garden of Eden was meant to prevent him from overturning this Divine verdict by eating of the Tree of Life.[4]

This second explanation offered by Ramban likewise presents difficulties, because ultimately man did not die – neither immediately nor soon after the sin. In fact, he lived to the age of 930, which was beyond the average age of his contemporaries.[5] Where, then,

is the death sentence that was imposed on him? The text seems to indicate that his punishment was not death, but rather hard labor:

"Cursed is the ground because of you; in sorrow you shall eat of it all the days of your life. And it shall produce thorns and thistles for you, and you shall eat the herbs of the field. By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread, until your return to the earth, for from it you were taken, for you are dust, and to dust you shall return." [6]

In Abravanel's view, God forbade Adam to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, while the Tree of Life was one of the trees whose fruit he was originally permitted to eat. The Tree of Life, according to Abravanel, prevented aging and death, and had it not been for man's sin, he would have lived forever, since he was surrounded by the most optimal and ideal conditions in terms of food, air, water, Divine protection, etc., which precluded any illness or any other cause of death. Even natural aging would be prevented, thanks to the healing properties of the Tree of Life. It was only the removal of man from the Garden of Eden and from the Tree of Life that brought about a situation in which he would ultimately die, since he was now severed from the optimal conditions that nurtured his existence. He would now have to expend enormous amounts of energy – both physical ("by the sweat of your brow") and spiritual ("in sorrow") - in his battle with the ground that brought forth thorns and thistles. This is what eventually resulted in his death and return to the earth from whence he had been taken.

Abravanel's explanation appears to answer several questions: why God planted the Tree of Life in the garden; the meaning of the warning "on the day you eat of it you shall surely die"; how all of this fits with the fact that Adam lived nearly 1,000 years; how the punishment that he was actually given conforms with the punishment that had originally been promised; why the prohibition applied only to the Tree of Knowledge; and more. However, we have yet to explain the connection between Adam's sin and his expulsion from the Garden of Eden. According to Abravanel's explanation, it would have been appropriate for the Torah to state that Adam's punishment, in the wake of his sin and the eating of the Tree of Knowledge, was expulsion from the Garden of Eden, which distanced him from the Tree of Life and the optimal conditions for his existence. In fact, what the text tells us is that his punishment was that "by the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread," while the expulsion from the Garden is intended only to prevent him from making himself even more similar to God by eating from the Tree of Life and living forever. As the text testifies:

The Lord God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil; now, let him not stretch forth his hand and take also from the Tree of Life, and eat from it, and live forever." So the Lord God sent him away from the Garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he had been taken. And He drove out the man, and to the east of the Garden of Eden He placed the keruvim, with the bright blade of the revolving sword, to guard the way to the Tree of Life.

However, Abravanel explains that the expulsion from the Garden of Eden is itself the punishment for eating from the Tree of Knowledge, since the attendant conditions – "by the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread", "in sorrow shall you shall eat of it", and "it shall produce thorns and thistles for you" – all come about only if man is not in the Garden of Eden, where his nourishment awaits him without the need for any effort, since the entire garden is full of trees that produce good fruit that suffice for his food. This is the meaning of the verse, "And the Lord God sent him out of the Garden of Eden to till the ground from

whence he was taken." The expulsion from the garden comes to fulfill the punishment, "By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread, until your return to the land, for from it you were taken," and ultimately to have man return to dust – i.e., death, as God had promised: "For on the day you eat of it you shall surely die".

But with regard to the Tree of Knowledge, Abravanel's explanation, too, leaves us with some difficulty. He rejects Ramban's view that prior to the sin Adam had no will and free choice, since this is of man's very essence, and if he had no will and free choice then it would have been meaningless to command him anything, as discussed above. Instead, Abravanel concurs with the view that is rejected by Ramban – that the fruit has the effect of intensifying the sexual appetite. To his view, God planted this tree in the garden because it had a positive effect if looked at or touched – this sufficed to arouse man to have sexual relations with his wife in order to reproduce. Thus, the fruit was meant to be looked at and touched, but eating of it brought about an intense desire that led to sin and caused man to deviate from his Divinely-given purpose, and for this reason it was prohibited. Abravanel explains that it was for this reason that it was called the "Tree of Knowledge [of] good and evil" – since a small measure of its effect was beneficial for man, but eating from it such that its effect was too strong was evil. This also explains God's warning, "For on the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" – because eating of the fruit of the tree harms the balance that is necessary for man's wellbeing and will inevitably strike at his immortality, causing him to die.

Thus far it seems that Abravanel has given thorough treatment to the question of why God planted the Tree of Knowledge in the garden at all, if eating of it was forbidden. However, in addressing Ramban's question – i.e., attempting to explain how the description "you shall become like God" can be referring to the intensification of the sexual drive – Abravanel runs into difficulty and proposes various explanations, which all prove unsatisfactory. He first proposes that eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge will cause an increase of sexual desire, which will lead to the bearing of sons and daughters, and this will cause man to resemble God, in that it creates new beings and increases the amount of life in the world. The problem with this is that according to Abravanel's own view, Adam and Chava were able to bear children even before they ate from the tree; in fact, the mere sight of the tree, or touching it, sufficed for this purpose. It is therefore not clear how the increase of sexual desire following the sin makes them resemble God more closely.

The expression "their eyes were opened" is also explained by Abravanel in a forced manner that is far removed from the plain meaning of the text. He suggests that now man's eyes were opened to the beauty of his wife, such that he would feel desire for her.

Another interpretation proposed by Abravanel is that the verse, "Behold, man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil" is actually meant as a question: "Was man created in God's image ("like one of Us") in order to know good and evil – which is an inclination after materialism and physical desire?!" According to this view, the knowledge of good and evil is not a quality by virtue of which man resembles God. However, this idea can be applied only in this verse, but not in the serpent's words to the woman – "For God knows that on the day that you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you will become like God, knowing good and evil".

Abravanel proposes a third interpretation: that the verse is formulated in abbreviated form, and what God is saying is that originally man was created "as one of Us, knowing good and evil" – in the positive intellectual and spiritual sense, but now he is inclined to a

materialistic knowledge of good and evil, in accordance with Abravanel's explanation of the meaning of eating from the Tree of Knowledge, and there is therefore no possibility now of leaving him in the Garden of Eden, where there is eternal life. He must be sent away, to till the ground from whence he was taken. Here again, it is difficult to understand the connection between this interpretation and the words of the serpent.

Therefore it would seem more reasonable to posit that knowledge of good and evil is indeed a positive characteristic, and it is indeed a trait by virtue of which man does resemble God – but in this parasha and in this first commandment given to man, the Torah is teaching a fundamental lesson concerning all the mitzvot of the Torah. We learn that we must obey God's command even if it appears to us that it will cause us harm, while transgressing it would seem to bring great benefit and advantage. We are committed to God's command even if we believe that setting it aside will advance us and develop our potential in positive directions. Perhaps we may even take a step further and say that the prohibition of eating from the Tree of Knowledge was a temporary prohibition, meant as a test for Adam, rather than an indication that God meant for man to remain forever a being unable to distinguish between good and evil.[7] Perhaps we continue to this day to pay the price of having acquired the ability to distinguish between good and evil through sin and contrary to God's command, rather than at God's own initiative, at His chosen time.

Despite all of the explanations offered above, many of us are left with the feeling that the questions arising from this parasha are better than the answers. My son Elad showed me that R. Yehuda Leon Ashkenazi, who elaborated at great length in his explanation of the chapters on Creation in his work *Sod Ha-Ivri*, provides no explanation for this parasha. In chapter 6, note 189, the editor notes:

Over the many cycles of study of the Creation, Rabbi Ashkenazi repeatedly said that he would come back to the story of the Garden of Eden at the end of the year – but we never merited this.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1]Attention should be paid to the fact that it is only the Tree of Knowledge that is forbidden, and not the Tree of Life – although the woman tells the serpent that God has forbidden them to eat from the tree which is "in the midst of the garden," which is where the Tree of Life also grew (see 2:9.)

[2]It should be noted that, in a similar way, chapter 1 depicts "man" as having been created from the outset as male and female, whereas in chapter 2, the creation of woman is presented as a response and solution to an original deficiency in Creation:

And the Lord God said, "It is not good for man to be alone; I will make him a help to match him." And from the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and He brought each to the man to see what he would call it. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name... but for the man there was found no help to match him. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; and He took one of his sides, and closed up the flesh in its place. And the Lord God made the side, which He had taken from the man, into a woman, and He brought her to the man. And the man said, "This now is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, for she was taken from man." Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.

[3]Concerning this assertion, it should be noted that in the first lesson of Derashot Ha-Ran, the Ran does in fact explain the story of the Garden of Eden, and in a manner that is quite similar to the explanation that Abravanel himself offers.

[4]This interpretation seems to be suggested by Ramban, who writes at the end of chapter 3:

The Holy One, blessed be He, wanted His decree to be fulfilled in the death of man, whereas if he were to eat from the Tree of Life, which was created in order to grant those who ate from it with eternal life, then the decree would be cancelled: either he would not die at all, or he would not die at the age that had been determined for him and for his descendants. Now that he had free choice, the Tree [of Life] was withheld from him, for in the beginning he would do only that which he had been commanded to, and he did not eat from it because he had no need to.

)The phrase "in the beginning he would do only that which he had been commanded to" is not clear; there appears to be a contradiction between the beginning of the sentence and the end. Does the need to prevent him from eating of the Tree of Life arise from the fact that prior to eating of the Tree of Knowledge, man did only what he was commanded to do – an idea that is problematic, in light of his eating from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge? Or does it arise from the situation described by Ramban at the end, that "he did not eat from it because he had no need to" – which is easily understood in light of Chazal's explanation that prior to eating of the Tree of Knowledge, man was supposed to live forever, even without eating from the Tree of Life?

[5]Only two individuals in all of human history are recorded as having lived longer than Adam: Yered and Metushelach.

[6]The words "until your return to the earth, for from it you were taken, for you are dust, and to dust shall you return," seem to support Chazal's view that the decree of death was imposed upon man only in the wake of his eating from the Tree of Knowledge. See below.

[7]In this respect, as in many others (see, for example, note 2 above), the description in chapters 2-3 is different from the description in chapter 1, where man's resemblance to God does not arise from sin and is not acquired in an improper way, but rather is part of God's original intention in creating man "in His image" and "as His likeness".