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Dedicated by Steven Weiner and Lisa Wise with prayers for Refuah Shelemah
for all who require healing, comfort and peace –
those battling illnesses visibly and invisibly, publicly and privately.
May Hashem mercifully grant us strength, courage and compassion.

Why was Adam prohibited from eating from the Tree of Knowledge?¹

By Rav Gad Eldad

In *Guide of the Perplexed* (I, 2), Rambam addresses a conundrum:

Some years ago a wise man asked me an important question; both the question and our answer deserve close examination... Said the questioner: the plain meaning of the text would seem to indicate that [God's] original intention had been that man should be like the rest of the animals, which have no intellect or reason or distinction between good and evil, and that it was Adam's disobedience that brought him that great perfection that is unique to humanity, i.e., possession of that consciousness which we have [of good and evil], which is the noblest of all human faculties, and the essential characteristic of human beings. It is baffling that the punishment for his rebellion should raise him to a pinnacle of perfection – intellect – which he had not previously attained. This is tantamount to asserting that a certain person was rebellious and exceedingly sinful, and therefore his nature was changed for the better, and he was made to shine as a star in the heavens.

Rambam goes on to answer the question through philosophical analysis and comparison of “true/ false” to “good/ evil”. We shall attempt to seek an answer to this question within the plain text itself.

Eating manna vs. eating of the Tree of Knowledge

¹ Based on my article, “*She-lo Yihyeh Chotei Niskar: Le-havanat Mashma'uto shel Chet Etz Ha-da'at*,” *Tzohar* 12 (5763), 43-47.

A number of linguistic parallels allude to a connection between eating manna in the desert and eating from the Tree of Knowledge. In our *parasha*, we read:

And God said: "Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed... and every tree on which is the fruit yielding seed; **to you it shall be for food.**" (*Bereishit* 1:29)

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying: "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat..." (*Bereishit* 2:16)

In the story of the manna, we read:

And Moshe said to them: "This is the bread that **God has given you for food. This is the thing which God has commanded...**" (*Shemot* 16:15-16)

The two situations are in fact the inverse of one another. The manna is the only food available to the people during their wanderings in the desert; it is produced by God especially for these conditions, it comes with specific instructions, and it has a specific purpose.

And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God led you these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you, and to test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. And He humbled you and caused you to be hungry and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know; in order that He might make it known to you that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God does man live. (*Devarim* 8:2-3)

The picture arising in relation to the Tree of Knowledge is the opposite: Adam is commanded to enjoy the goodness of all the trees of the garden; only one single, specific food is forbidden to him: "But of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil you shall not eat of it, for on the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (*Bereishit* 2:17).

The significance of this contrast is easier to understand if we consider a different aspect of the comparison: "And fed you with manna, which you did not know." With the first appearance of the manna, the text describes the people as being struck with amazement, not knowing what they are looking at:

And when the layer of dew had gone up, behold, upon the face of the wilderness there lay a fine flaky substance, as fine as the frost on the ground. **And when the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it (Man hu)?" For they did not know what it was.** And Moshe said to

them: "This is the bread that God has given you for food." (*Shemot* 16:14-15)

As we have seen, the motif of not knowing in the context of the manna appears again in *Devarim* 8:3: "**And He humbled you and caused you to be hungry and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know...**"

Here again, the situation is a contrast to that of Adam in the Garden of Eden, for whom **the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil** is forbidden.

The result of eating of the fruit of this tree is foretold further on by the serpent:

And the serpent said to the woman: "You shall not surely die, for **God knows** that on the day you eat of it, then your eyes shall be opened, and you shall be as God, **knowing good and evil.**" (*Bereishit* 3:4-5)

The Israelites confront manna; the text emphasizes their lack of knowledge or familiarity with it, and in this situation they are commanded to eat it. In the Garden of Eden, Adam knows about the Tree of Knowledge, but he is forbidden to eat from it, and thus the path to knowledge is blocked.

One further aspect of the comparison between the two stories deserves our attention. In both cases, human beings are driven to satisfy their curiosity and thereby fail the test. In the Garden of Eden, they fail to restrain themselves from tasting of the forbidden fruit:

And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate. (*Bereishit* 3:6)

In a similar manner, there are those among the Israelites who seek to understand the nature of the manna and leave some for the next day to see what will happen:

And Moshe said: "Let no man leave of it until the morning." But they did not obey Moshe, and some of them left of it until the morning, and it bred worms and stank; and Moshe was angry with them. (*Shemot* 16:19-20)

We may therefore summarize the two contrasting features of the manna and the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge in the following manner:

1. The fruit of the Tree of Knowledge is located in the midst of a garden that is filled with every tree which is pleasing to the eye and desirable to the palate, all available to man; this fruit is the only one that they are commanded not to eat. The

manna descends in the wilderness, a place of desolation; this is the only available food, and there is a command as to the manner in which it is to be consumed.

2. Man confronts both the Tree of Knowledge and the manna from within a state of not knowing. He is commanded to eat of the manna, which will give him insight and expand his knowledge, while his path to knowledge via the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge is blocked.

Let us now examine these contrasts more closely.

“That I may test them, whether they will follow My teaching or not”

First, let us note some features of the unit on the manna (*Shemot* 16).

1. At the outset, God states that its consumption is bound up with observance of His commands and teachings:

And God said to Moshe: “Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a certain portion every day, that I may test them, **whether they will follow My teaching or not.**” (v. 4)

When the people fail this test, God expresses His displeasure similarly:

And God said to Moshe: “How long will you refuse to **keep My commandments and My teachings?**” (v. 28)

2. It is readily apparent that the story of the manna contains expressions that allude to the verses describing the eating of the *korban pesach* (passover sacrifice) in Egypt. With regard to the manna, we read:

“Gather of it **every man according to his eating**, an omer for every individual, according to the number of your persons shall you take it, every man for those who are in his tent.” And the Israelites did so... they gathered every man according to his eating. And Moshe said: “**Let no man leave of it until the morning...**” And they gathered it every morning, **every man according to his eating**, and when the sun grew hot, it melted. (*Shemot* 16:16-21)

In relation to the *pesach* in Egypt, we find:

Speak to all the congregation of Israel, saying: “On the tenth day of this month they shall take to them every man a lamb, according to the house of their fathers; a lamb for a house... **every man according to his eating** shall you make your count for the lamb... And **you shall let nothing of it remain until the morning**, and that which remains of it until the morning you shall burn with fire... and you shall eat it in haste; it is God’s passover.” (*Shemot* 12:3-11)

This echo of the *pesach* would seem to indicate an attempt to inculcate in the people a consciousness of the temporary aspect of eating the manna, whose rules recall those of the *pesach* in Egypt. The journey through the wilderness was meant to be a brief, transient experience; after receiving the Torah, the nation was

meant to head directly to Kena'an. Only at the end of this unit does the Torah expose the bitter reality (v. 35): "And the Israelites ate the manna for forty years, until they came to inhabited land; they ate the manna until they came to the borders of the land of Kena'an."

The Torah seems to hold this verse back deliberately until the end of the unit so as not to spoil its message. In this way, it conveys the idea that the temporary nature of this arrangement and the message behind it were realized even after the road became significantly longer, and the situation was maintained for forty years. Thus, throughout this time the nation ate this desert bread as an ongoing test of whether they could observe God's laws and internalize the message of the manna's transience.

At the end of the forty years, the Torah mentions the manna once more: mission accomplished, as it were. All of that time had indeed been necessary for this purpose:

And Moshe called to all of Israel, and said to them: "You have seen all that God did before your eyes in the land of Egypt to Pharaoh and to all his servants, and to all his land: the great trials which your eyes have seen, the signs, and those great miracles. **Yet God has not given you a heart to perceive, nor eyes to see, nor ears to hear, until this day. For I have led you forty years in the wilderness;** your clothes are not worn old upon you, and your shoe is not worn old upon your foot. **You have not eaten bread, nor have you drunk wine or strong drink, that you might know that I am the Lord your God.**" (*Devarim* 29:1-5)

Over the course of the journey, it becomes apparent that there is a direct connection between the two areas. As the people continue to consume the manna that God rains down for them, so they progress in their consciousness and knowledge of God.²

Now let us return to the contrast between the manna and the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge.

"Oh, that My people would obey Me"

We propose that the Torah offers an alternative to or substitute for the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, in the form of the manna. The chosen people is

² We might extend this idea of the direct relationship to the Torah itself. The Revelation at Sinai was a one-time event; at the end of the forty days, Moshe descended with the Tablets of the Covenant. Over the course of the journey through the desert, additional commandments were gradually added. The writing of the Torah was completed only at the end of the forty years (*Devarim* 31:24). Thus, the people journeyed through the desert, nourished by manna from heaven and, concurrently, learning the laws from heaven.

commanded explicitly to eat food that descends from heaven – a food that helps to expand their knowledge, their understanding of the way in which God guides the world, and their consciousness of His Sovereignty. This serves to make it clear that God never sought to withhold good from man, nor did He ever want man to be ignorant. God had always sought to imbue humanity with knowledge – but they did not wait to receive it, but rather acted impudently and seized it on their own; for this, they were punished. Later on in history, it was clear to all that God Himself was acting to inculcate and imbue knowledge in humanity, as a sign of His love and closeness – not as the result of a misstep, but rather as an intentional act. God fed man with His goodness – with a unique food that nourished their body while at the same time giving them knowledge of good and evil, instructing them as to the manner in which it should be eaten, such that people came to have knowledge of their Maker and some consciousness of the way in which He manages the world.

Now, we must ask, why did God not give man this knowledge through the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge? Why did He prefer to inculcate knowledge through the eating of the manna?

Before answering this question, it is important that we note a difference between the way in which knowledge is acquired through eating of the fruit of the Tree and the way in which it is acquired through eating the manna. By eating the fruit of the Tree man acquires knowledge directly: through the very act of eating, their eyes are opened. The eating of the manna, in contrast, does not in itself bring knowledge. Rather, the eating is the basis of a lifestyle which imbues those who embrace it with knowledge.

Let us consider the ramifications of this distinction.

Knowing good and evil

In the story of the early generations of man, we encounter the following description:

And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born to them, that the **distinguished men** (*bnei ha-elohim*; literally: sons of God) saw that the daughters of men were **fair** (*tovo*; literally: good), and they took them wives of all whom they chose. And God said: "My spirit shall not always strive on account of man, for that he also is flesh, and his days shall be a hundred and twenty years." There were Nephilim in the earth in those days, and also after that, when the **distinguished men** came in to the daughters of men, and they bore children to them; these were mighty men of old, men of renown. And God saw that the **wickedness** of (*ra'at*) man was great in the earth, and that all the impulse of the thoughts of his heart were only **evil** (*ra*)

continually. And God repented that He had made man on the earth, and it grieved Him at His heart. (*Bereishit* 6:1-6)

This unit describes the consolidation of God's decision to destroy His creation. The description includes expressions that harken back to the story of the Tree of Knowledge. Men are depicted here as "sons of God" and mention is made of the concepts of good and evil. The unit seems to allude to eating from the Tree of Knowledge, as described by the serpent in its efforts to persuade the woman:

And the serpent said to the woman: "You shall not surely die, for God knows that on the day you eat of it, then your eyes shall be opened, and **you shall be as God, knowing good and evil.**" (*Bereishit* 3:4-5)

The Torah seems to be connecting the two units in a cause-and-effect relationship. Paradoxically, we see that it is specifically the fact that man is a son of God, knowing good and evil, that brings about its fall, to the point where God regrets having created it.

"To know wisdom and instruction; to perceive the words of understanding"

The Torah contrasts two mechanisms of the human acquisition of knowledge, as well as two types of knowledge. Knowledge may be acquired as a neutral item for consumption, in accordance with a mathematical formula of cause and effect. A person who works to acquire knowledge will amass it automatically, as a result of their efforts, in the same manner in which a person who eats food when hungry will be satiated by it as a result of automatic physiological processes. Acquisition of knowledge in this manner does not entail any further demands on the consumer: all one needs to do is to concentrate on and delve into the details of what they are learning. Once they acquire it, they are entitled to use their knowledge as they see fit.

A different manner of acquiring knowledge is represented by the eating of the manna. This is not a detached act of consumption that stands alone. Rather, it is a meaningful eating that balances life forces in a prescribed way. In this manner, knowledge is not acquired as a mechanical, automatic result, as a product in and of itself; rather, it is part of a broader way of life and moral teaching.

The gap between these two types of eating teaches us that knowledge is not merely a neutral item of consumption that comes to satisfy an intellectual desire. It must be acquired on a moral platform, with an understanding of its place in the life of the human race, with all its risks and opportunities.

Now we can answer the question presented by Rambam. Man did not benefit from eating of the forbidden fruit. The knowledge that he acquired did not

help him to develop and advance his world; rather, it led to confusion of the concepts of good and evil to a point where his continued existence was threatened. Knowledge in and of itself is full of formulas and laws of nature, with no limitations of ethics or morality. Symbolically, its very acquisition is accompanied by an act that violates the ethical charge of the Creator, merely for the sake of satisfying the desire for knowledge. Such knowledge, unrestricted by an ethical framework that weighs its consequences, may bring about the annihilation of mankind. The ideal knowledge that God wants for man is not that of Bilam, “who knows the knowledge of the Most High” but gives immoral and licentious counsel. God wants man to acquire knowledge once the moral imperative is firmly ingrained in him. Such knowledge is not neutral and colorless; rather, the good is colored by a positive command, while evil is colored by a negative command.

The Generation of the Wilderness merited to receive knowledge in this manner, in generous quantities.

Behold, I have set before you this day life and **good**, and death and **evil**; in that I command you this day to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments. Then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God shall bless you in the land into which you go to possess it... I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore **choose life, that both you and your seed may live.** (*Devarim* 30:15-19)

Translated by Kaeren Fish