

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Bereishis

Behind Good and Evil: The Sin of the Eitz Hada'as

BACKGROUND: "KNOWING GOOD AND EVIL"

Without a doubt, one of the dominant episodes in Parshas Bereishis is the sin of the *Eitz Hada'as*. In order to attain some understanding of this sin, as well as its reverberations throughout history until our times, we will first need to understand on some level what the *Eitz Hada'as* was and why it was forbidden to eat from it. We begin with a basic question:

Why is knowing the difference between good and evil a bad thing? It actually sounds like a good thing, for if one doesn't know the difference between them, how will he be able to choose the one over the other?

Clearly, Adam and Chava had the wherewithal to make the right choices even without eating from the tree, and eating from it transitioned them to a drastically inferior way of choosing good over evil. But what other ways of choosing good over evil are there?

1. The *Rambam* explains that prior to eating from the *Eitz Hada'as*, Man's choices were not framed in terms of "good and evil," but rather in terms of "truth and falsehood."¹ Sin was recognized as being inherently false, and any of its proposed benefits were instantly seen through for the spurious vanities that they are. With that clarity of vision, choosing to sin would essentially involve choosing to do something that one knew was false, which most people don't do. Upon eating from the *Eitz Hada'as*, Man came to see things differently. Evil became something whose benefits seemed quite real. The basis for avoiding sin was no longer because it was false, but rather because it was the morally wrong thing to do, beneficial though it might be. This type of choice is harder to make, as history and experience have shown.
2. In a different vein, the *Ramban* explains that prior to eating from the *Eitz Hada'as*, although Man had the capacity to sin, he had no inherent desire to do so; his nature was pure and upright, directed toward fulfilling Hashem's will. The temptation to do evil came from without, in the form of the snake who resided by the tree. Upon eating from the *Eitz Hada'as*, the desire to sin entered Man.²

¹ Rambam, *Moreh Nevuchim* 1:2. See *Michtav Me'Eliyahu* Vol 1 p. 139.

² Ramban to Bereishis 2:9. In this context, the Ramban translates the term "*da'as*" as "will". See also Nefesh Hachaim (1:6) who explains the word *da'as* as "connection." Upon eating from the tree, good and evil became fused

UNDERSTANDING ADAM'S SIN

The above two approaches should suffice to illustrate the idea that eating from the *Eitz Hada'as* produced a negative outcome, which was the reason why it was prohibited in the first place. However, this begs the obvious question.

How did Adam come to sin? What led him to make the wrong choice?

The question is accentuated when we remind ourselves that at this stage Adam's nature was fundamentally attuned with doing the will of Hashem. How is that compatible with the idea of him sinning at all?

The Arizal explains: The way in which the snake was able to tempt man to sin was to persuade him to eat from the tree *for the purpose of better serving his Creator!* The very fact that making the right choices would become harder once Adam ate from the tree was presented as the reason for him to do so. If he ate from the tree and nonetheless succeeded in choosing good over evil, the glory to God would be immeasurably greater than it would be in his current state. This brings us to a paradox: Adam violated Hashem's command in order to further the fulfillment of His will! This was how eating from the *Eitz Hada'as* was rationalized — the ends (future high-level mitzvos) would justify the means (a present sin).

We may ponder further and ask: What led Adam to this decision? After all, presumably he should have asked himself that if, as the snake claims, the post-*Eitz Hada'as* state is the better one, why would Hashem Himself not have commanded Adam to eat from it?

The answer to this question is that a significant element within the sin of the *Eitz Hada'as* is that of Adam subscribing to the idea that he had a better idea of how to succeed in life, better even than Hashem, even in terms of fulfilling Hashem's will! Although this sounds delusional (and it is), this is testimony to the extent to which man's ego can inflate his perceived capacities. Although the notion of finite man out-thinking Infinite Intelligence is by definition ludicrous, he can still be tempted to try and do so. This essentially means that while man's intellect is limited, his ego-driven sense of self is potentially unlimited.

ROOTS: THE EARTH'S DECISION

If we wish to attain a deeper understanding of Adam's sin, we need to consider its background. To do so, let us consult what is probably one of the most baffling comments of Rashi in our parsha, indeed, perhaps in the entire Chumash. On the third day of Creation, Hashem commanded that the earth bring forth "עץ פרי".³ Although this translates literally as "trees of fruit," i.e. that bear fruit, that is mentioned in the very next phrase: "עושה פרי" – which produce fruit." What, then, is the meaning of the first phrase? Based on the Midrash Rashi explains:

*Eitz Pri: [means] that the taste of the tree itself should be like that of the fruit. However, the earth did not do so, rather, "The earth brought forth... trees **that produce** fruit," but the tree itself was not as fruit. Therefore, when man was cursed for his sin, [the earth] was likewise recalled for its sin and it was cursed.⁴*

together inside of Man. From this stage on, the temptation to sin comes from within, making it harder to combat and indeed, sometimes, harder to even identify, for if both impulses exist within the person, how does he know whether what "he" wants to do is good or evil?

3 Bereishis 1:11.

4 This refers to Hashem's words to Adam after he ate from the *Eitz Hada'as* (3:17): "אָרִירָה הָאֲדָמָה בְּעִבּוֹרְךָ – cursed is the earth on your account."

Needless to say, these words require much elucidation:

1. How are we meant to understand the idea of the earth disobeying Hashem instructions? Does the earth have a *yetzer hara* which would cause it to sin?
2. Even if the earth somehow has the capacity to “disobey”, what would cause it to do so on this occasion?
3. If indeed, the earth sinned by deviating from Hashem’s instructions, why was it not punished straight away, instead only being cursed later on when man sinned?

The commentators explain that the earth’s act of disobedience was not a sin per se, rather, it was an expression of the earth as a distinct physical entity. In the same way as the earth is distant from Hashem in that it is physical in nature while He is absolute spirituality, likewise, it is distant from being on absolute accord with His will.⁵ To develop this point further, the Chizkuni⁶ explains that the reasoning behind the earth’s decision was that if the trees would taste the same as their fruit, then people might not wait for the fruit, instead eating the trees, leading to their depletion. Now, while the earth itself does not possess the faculty of reason, every physical entity has a *sar* (spiritual overseer) that is responsible for its growth and well-being. Hence, although the *sar* too, does not have free-will in the moral sense,⁷ nevertheless, in its capacity as overseeing an independent entity, the *sar* naturally sought to vouchsafe the preservation of its creation. Now, this itself was not a sin, nor, indeed, was the earth punished for it at the time. Subsequently, however, it would lead to sin on someone else’s part.

Adam was created comprised of two parts: his spiritual soul which was blown into him by Hashem, and his physical body which was formed from the earth. As such, included in his physical makeup was the earth’s property of asserting its independence. This was in contrast to the soul which remained intimately connected to its spiritual Source. Indeed, the challenge of Man was for his spiritual connectedness assert itself over his physical disconnectedness, drawing them both towards his Creator. In the event, the opposite occurred, for his disconnected sense of self ended up encroaching on his spiritual decisions, leading him to disobey Hashem’s instructions based on what he felt was the better course of enhancing that very spiritual connection!

In this light, we can see understand why, although the earth was not originally cursed, nevertheless, when Adam was cursed, the earth was cursed with him. The destiny and wellbeing of all elements of creation rise or fall based on Man’s usage of them. Hence, when the faculty of disconnectedness and “assertion of self” which existed naturally within the earth contributed to Man’s sin, it shared in the consequences of that sin.

The result of that first sin was that death was introduced into the world. This was not “only” as a punishment for disobeying Hashem’s command, but also a natural consequence of the fact that in eating from the *Eitz Hada’as*, Adam had distanced himself from Hashem, the Source of Life.

To be sure, the point here is not that the intellect is the enemy. Rather, like every human faculty, it is a gift that can be used for good or for bad. We are all encouraged to use our intellect to the best of our abilities in a manner that is meaningful and productive. What is unacceptable, and when things begin to go wrong, is when we take our intellect and use it vainly and destructively, insisting on trying to out-think the Infinite Wisdom regarding how best to lead our lives.

5 See Gur Aryeh Bereishis loc. cit.

6 Ibid.

7 [Although we find instances of angels sinning and being punished, this is in situations when they have descended to earth and assumed human form, thereby also incorporating human characteristics, see e.g. Yoma 67b with Rashi ibid. s.v. *Uza*, and Rashi Bereishis 19:22 s.v. *Ki* (*Maayan Beis Hashoeva*, Parshas Vayeira, Cf Rabbeinu Bachye Bereishis 3:6).]

BRANCHES: THE CHET HA'EGEL

Approximately twenty five hundred years after the sin of the *Eitz Hada'as*, the Jewish people committed the sin of the Golden Calf. This episode would alter the course of their history and continues to reverberate until our times, as the Gemara states: “there is no generation that does not taste a portion from the punishment for that sin”. In describing that episode, we find an unusual expression in the words of the prophet Hoshea:⁸

וְהֵמָּה כְּאַדָּם עֲבְרוּ בְרִית

And they, like Adam, transgressed a covenant.

This verse informs us that not only did the people violate their covenant with Hashem by making the *Egel*, but they did so “like Adam.” Apparently, there is some essential commonality between these two sins. Likewise, the Gemara⁹ explains that Hashem’s words “אָנִי אֲמַרְתִּי אֱלֹהִים אַתֶּם... אֲבָן”¹⁰ refer to the state of the Jewish people before and after the *Egel*. Here, too, we see that the fall of the *Egel* is framed with reference to the *Eitz Hada'as*: “Like Adam.”

In what way were the Jewish people, when they made the *Egel*, “like Adam”?

OUR FINEST HOUR

In order to appreciate the connection between these two episodes, let us consider a well-known statement in the Gemara:

בשעה שאמרו ישראל נעשה ונשמע, יצאה בת-קול ואמרה מי גילה רז זה לבני שמלאכי
השרת משתמשין בו

At the time when Yisrael said “We will do and we will hear,” a Heavenly voice issued forth and said, “Who revealed this secret to My children, the one used by the ministering angels?”

The commentators explain: The phrase “we will do and we will hear” appears backwards, for how can one do anything without first hearing it? Rather, with this phrase, the people indicated their preparedness to act even before hearing what Hashem would actually demand of them. This reflects an implicit and complete alignment of their will with that of Hashem, similar to the level of the angels who exist purely to fulfill Hashem’s will. In terms of our discussion, we can understand that the Jewish people at Har Sinai succeeded in reclaiming the level of Adam before the sin. Indeed, the Gemara states elsewhere¹¹ that when the Jewish people stood at Har Sinai, the “venom” that had entered humankind during the sin of the *Eitz Hada'as* left them. Moreover, as was the case with Adam in his pre-sin state, they could have been free from death, as the verse states “I had said, ‘You are as angels’”.

Yet here, too, we must ask: With their will in total alignment with that of Hashem, how could the people then proceed to make the Golden Calf?

8 6:7.

9 Avodah Zarah 5a.

10 Tehillim 82:6-7.

11 Shabbos 146a.

ECHOES OF THE EITZ HADA'AS

The commentators explain¹² that essentially, the people were purely looking for a means through which to communicate with Hashem.¹³ Until now, the conduit had been Moshe, yet he had not returned from the mountain. Such a desire is not in itself reprehensible, indeed, it is highly laudable. The problem, however, was the way in which this desire was expressed. Let us consider, with Moshe missing, the obvious conduit for Hashem's wishes to them was there in the form of Aharon. As such, the correct course should have been to approach Aharon and ask "What shall we do now?" Instead, they approached him and demanded, "Here is what you shall do now!" instructing him to make a calf for them. What was behind this reversal of "flow of command"? The answer will be distressingly familiar: The people had a compulsion for *them* to arrange the way in which the Divine presence would draw close to them. With this, they were giving in to the aspect which demands independence and control – even regarding fulfilling Hashem's will! Having given entry to this impulse, it was now possible for what may have originally been a well-intentioned enterprise to degenerate overnight into actual idol-worship.

Looked at in this light, it is not hard to see how this was effectively a repeat of Adam's own sin. Thus, the verse says: "And they like Adam, transgressed a covenant." Likewise, in distancing themselves from a total identification with Hashem's will, they left themselves once more susceptible to death, as Adam himself has originally done, hence, "Like Adam, you will die."

CONCLUSION: REVERBERATIONS

Indeed, it is fair to say that once we understand the background to the sin of the *Eitz Hada'as*, we will appreciate that it was not only echoed in the episode of the *Egel*, but continues to reverberate throughout the generations in the challenge to use our God-given faculty of intellect in a productive and elevating manner, and not allow it to be enlisted in the service of vanity and delusion. To this end, Hashem has granted us a gift of love, the *Eitz Hachaim* (Tree of Life) in the form of the Torah, which illuminates our path toward an ultimate connection with the Source of life.

12 See at length Beis Halevi, Parshas Ki Sisa.

13 See Ramban Shemos 32:1.