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Parshas B’reishis

The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil

By Rabbi Chaim Zev Citron

One of the most fascinating topics in the Torah is the story of the Eitz HaDaas, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Commentaries throughout the ages have sought to understand and interpret this enigmatic tale. Some interpretations try to get to the core of p’shat, the simple straightforward meaning, while some veer further away from the p’shat. But all of the interpretations of the classic commentaries have something important to teach us about how we should live our lives.

I’m going to discuss the story based on the commentary of the Be’er Mayim Chayim.

The term “tree” represents the divine attributes. It is the source of the souls. It is the source of the Torah. The physical trees in this world are a model representing the metaphysical tree (or trees) of the higher world.

In order for man to fulfill the purpose of his creation, he must choose good over evil. Obviously, he must understand what is good and what is evil to make that choice. However, the exposure to evil poses a great danger. Evil is very powerful. Man is strongly attracted to the physical delights of the world and can easily forfeit his spiritual awareness.

Man’s purpose is to choose good over evil. But how can he succeed in doing this when the temptation for evil is so strong? Let’s give an example from daily life.

When a person goes to pray and study in the morning in a synagogue, in a manner of speaking we might say he sees only good and is shielded from the temptations of the world. What does he see in the Shul? Holy books, tefillin, people praying and studying.

The moment he leaves the synagogue, all of the world’s temptations are suddenly before him. How does he overcome these temptations?

By fortifying himself during his time in the synagogue. In that spiritual world, he meditates on the love and fear of G-d and on his duties and obligations. He builds up the strength to enter the world and overcome its temptations.

So, too, in the beginning of the creation, man had to first be shielded from evil. He had to be immersed only in good and holiness. He was not supposed to know evil at all, therefore he was not supposed to eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Once he was strong enough, he would be ready to be exposed evil. After experiencing life at its best, its most holy, his values would be strong. At that point, he would be allowed, indeed required, to eat of the Tree of Knowledge. He would know evil as well as good, but he would have the strength to overcome evil.

According to this approach, the sin was not in the eating of the fruit of the tree. It was eating it prematurely. Man had not experienced enough goodness and holiness to be ready to face evil. He was not ready for the confrontation yet.

We cannot run away from this confrontation. It is our destiny to struggle with evil. But we must be prepared, we must imbibe holiness first and acquire the tools to deal with evil. With those tools in hand, we are ready to march into the world.

If only Adam and Chava had been patient! They would have acquired the wherewithal to defeat evil. Their sin was not waiting. Their sin was impatience to go out into the world, the world of good and evil, without the preparation that was needed.

To us, their descendants, the temptations of the world are great and very powerful. But we have Torah and Mitzvos, the Tree of Life, to give us the strength to not be corrupted, to be in the world and still maintain the holiness of life, to fulfill our task of choosing good.

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The snake says to Chava, “Didn’t G-d tell you not to eat any trees of the garden?”

Chava replies, “We may eat the other fruits, just not the fruit of the tree of knowledge.”

What is the meaning of this conversation?

One way in which the evil impulse can seduce us is by telling us to be more and more strict. You may sin by eating, so fast. You may sin by speaking, so don’t speak accept for Torah. You may sin with immoral behavior so don’t even be intimate with your spouse. Create barrier upon barrier, fence upon fence.

That is what the snake was saying. Really, G-d doesn’t want you to eat of any tree because if you do, you may eat of the forbidden tree as well, so deny *yourself* everything lest you sin.

Chava bought into this. We can read her words “We may eat of the other fruits” as “we shall in the future eat of the other fruits,” but for now, Mr. Snake, you’re right. We shouldn’t even eat the fruits of the other trees.

This approach to Judaism is a disaster. We become obsessed with sin, with self-denial, with fear of failure. Sooner or later, one cracks under this strain. How long can you go on with these restraints, these fences, this religion of denial! Sooner or later, you give up. Then you drop the core, the good, the essence as well as all of the burden of fear and guilt you placed upon yourself.

The service of G-d is a joy. It is a delight. Of course, there are restrictions, for some things are in fact bad and must be avoided. But we may in fact eat of the fruits of the rest of the garden. Nay, we should eat of the fruit. We should experience life at its best. As spiritual, as joyful, as a peon of love of G-d and love of man.

Don’t listen to the snake’s misinterpretation of Judaism. Listen to G-d who said, “Eat of the fruits of the garden.” Delight in G-d’s world. Delight in G-d’s Torah.