BS”D

*In the Messianic age when our hearts are purged of evil and all mankind knows G-d, the Garden of Eden will be restored.*

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The Path to the Tree of Life

The Torah tells us that after the sin of Adam and Chava, “The L-rd, G-d, said, ‘Now that man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil, now perhaps he will stretch out his hand and also take from the tree of life and eat and live forever.’” (Breishis 3:22) Hashem then banishes Adam from the garden and places the cherubim and the fiery double-edged sword east of the garden to guard the way to the tree of life.

Regarding the passage cited above, the Ibn Ezra discusses the Hebrew word *k’achad* (mimenu) “like one (of us).” Some commentators translate the word as “like one,” (not as “one of us” which would be a construct). They translate the passage as “Man has become like the One (i.e., G-d), and it is within him [within his ability] to know good and evil.”

The Ibn Ezra objects for several reasons. First, the vowelization is *k’achad* (*patach- patach*), which is the construct “one of.” If it meant “one,” the vowels would be *k’echad* (*segol – kamatz*). Second, the punctuation of the cantillation-notes puts the stop (the equivalent of a comma) after the word “*mimenu*,” i.e., like one of us. If the word *k’achad* means [the] one, the comma should have been after the word “one” (“like the One, it is in his ability [*mimenu*] to know good and evil”).

According to the Ibn Ezra’s interpretation, what is the meaning of “us” (like one of us)? G-d is speaking to the angels and saying, ‘Man is now like us, possessing knowledge of good and evil.’

Onkelos translates this passage like the first interpretation of the Ibn Ezra. “Behold, the man is unique (*echad*) in the world; it is in his power to know good and evil.”

Rashi at first glance seems to be following the view of Onkelos. Rashi explains this passage thus: “He is unique in the lower world just as I (G-d) am unique in the higher world. What is his uniqueness? He can distinguish good from evil which the animals and beasts cannot do.”

The commentary Mizrachi does indeed understand Rashi as meaning man is unique, i.e., he is “one,” and it is in his power (*mimenu*) to distinguish good and evil.

The Maharal interprets Rashi differently. He feels Rashi does connect the word *Echad* and *mimenu*. G-d says, “He is unique like us.” Rashi does not mean to make the word echad stand alone. Rather, the word is indeed a construct, but rather than meaning “like one of us,” it means “unique like us.” Thus, Rashi would be agreeing with the grammatical understanding of the Ibn Ezra.

Now, after G-d expresses his concern about Adam being like one of us (or being one and unique), He sets up the cherubim-angels with a glittering sword to guard the path to the tree of life so that Adam can not partake of its fruit.

The Ibn Ezra writes that a deeper understanding of this story shows us that man *can* live forever. But how can this be? After all, man is barred from eating of the tree of life. But that very fact indicates that if he *does* eat of the tree of life, he would live forever. If man can overcome the barrier of the cherubim, he would eat of the tree of life. But how does one overcome this barrier?

For purposes of further discussing this issue, I am going to follow the interpretation of the Alter Rebbe in Torah Ohr concerning the tree of good and evil.

G-d knows good and evil. The angels know good and evil. That knowledge does not harm the angels. They can see evil without being in the slightest way attracted to it. But man is different. Once he knows good and evil, he is attracted to evil. In a manner of speaking, he may be said to be contaminated by evil.

I believe that this is because of the dual nature of man. His G-dly soul, his spiritual side, can know evil and not be attracted to it. But man has a physical side, an animal-like side, and that part of man cannot look at evil without being affected by and attracted to it.

We may define evil as a separateness from G-d. To see only good means to feel and experience life and every aspect of life as a service and worship of G-d. Evil is selfishness and G-dlessness. To be attracted to evil means wanting to live life for purposes other than G-d. For personal pleasure and enjoyment. Life becomes self-centered. Ultimately, when taken further, that self-centeredness means first a lack of care for others and eventually a disdain for others, leading to grievous harm inflicted upon them.

It is possible to get back to the state of living life as a service to G-d. We must partake of the tree of life. The tree of life is the Torah, as is written, “It is a tree of life for those who hold fast to it.” (Proverbs 3:18) Through Torah, the good within us and within the world ultimately triumphs. The culmination of the process is the Messianic age when our hearts are purged of evil and all mankind knows G-d. The Garden of Eden has been restored. Evil and thus death are vanquished.

Let me end with a paraphrase from Midrash (Breishis Rabba 21:5)

Rabbi Pappas said, “Behold, man has become like one of us.” “Us” refers to the angels. Rabbi Akiva said, “Enough, Pappas!... (The word *mimenu* should not be translated “of us” but “it is in his power.”) G-d said, I gave man the power to choose the path of life and the path of death, and he chose the wrong path.

Rabbi Pappas is translating the verse like the Ibn Ezra: “Man is like one of us.” He is G-dlike and angel-like in his knowledge.

Rabbi Akiva doesn’t just disagree, but says “Enough!” He feels translating the passage as “one of us” leads to dualism, as if the angels are compared (*chas v’shalom*) to G-d. Therefore, he follows an interpretation similar to Onkelos: Man is like the One, he has the power to follow “good and evil,” i.e., the path of life or the opposite.