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בס"ד

## In the Garden of Eden

### 1. Setting

In the early chapters of Genesis, set in the primeval era of human existence, the Torah provides metaphorical and symbolic expositions of some of the most profound religious and psychological insights into the human condition. This study will focus on the events associated with the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:8–3:24) and the עץ הדעת טוב ורע – the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad – that is within it. (The translators are divided on how to render טוב ורע in this context, many preferring “good and evil.”)

G-d placed the newly created man, pure and untainted, in the Garden of Eden, a magnificent region where all human needs and delights were readily and securely available. It was a well-irrigated area that required only a normal degree of cultivation and maintenance to preserve its riches. The Tree of Life is present, of which humans may continually partake to rejuvenate themselves. But an important stipulation, with a serious consequence, was attached to this peaceful and tranquil life. G-d placed a command upon man: “But as for the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad, you must not eat of it; for at the time you eat of it you shall surely die” (2:17).

This is the only commandment G-d specifically gave man in his pristine state; it represents His most basic demand from humankind. In living his life, man is to recognize that he possesses a great degree of freedom to act but G-d also expects him to be obedient to Him and there are dire consequences for not doing so. This awareness is appropriately symbolized in conjunction with the most essential activity of human welfare: eating.

In this narrative, G-d creates woman from man and places her side by side with him in the garden, thus removing a shortcoming within man – as G-d said: “it

is not good for man to be alone” (v. 18). This reflects their great affinity to each other, indeed, a potential oneness. As an עֶזְרָא כְּנַגְדּוֹ, “a helpmate beside him,” woman complements man, providing the capacity for the two together to achieve greater success. Man celebrates the milestone with a song (v. 23). The occasion is marked with a brief narrative proclamation that describes the exclusive and primary nature of the marital bond: “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother and attach [himself] to his wife, and become one flesh” (v. 24). In this innocent state man and wife were naked but felt no shame (v. 25).

### 2. Rationalization

The serpent (שָׁרֵפְתַן), “slyest of the creatures of the field” (3:1), engages the woman in conversation with the specific purpose of tempting her to sin. It is evident that the crafty creature represents the evil inclination within man that always has something alluring to say to divert its possessor from the proper path.

It is noteworthy that in prebiblical Near Eastern folklore, the serpent was part of the group that comprised the adversaries of a chief deity, leading Isaiah to state, “On that day Hashem will punish with His hardened, great and mighty sword Leviathan the pursuing serpent (לִיָּתָן נֹחֵשׁ בְּרִיחַ) and Leviathan the twisted serpent (לִיָּתָן עֶקְלָתוֹן) and He will slay the *Tanin* that is in the sea” (Isa. 27:1). Interestingly, some pre-Torah mythological portrayals depict the serpent as walking upright, shedding etiological light on the punishment G-d meted out to it, “on your belly shall you walk” (Gen. 3:14).

The serpent employs a cunning ploy against the woman and “sets her up” with gross contortions of G-d’s command. His opening statement – “אָף כִּי אָמַרְתָּ, even though G-d had said not to eat of any tree in the garden” (3:1) – is a flagrant exaggeration of the

prohibition's scope and surely was a tactic, expecting it to be contradicted. At the same time, however, the serpent subtly transformed the qualitative force of G-d's command (2:16) from a major imperative into something He merely "said." In her response, the woman corrected the serpent on the more obvious error, but accepted the latter modification; she now spoke of what G-d "said." (In comparing her words with the command we may assume that Adam had transmitted G-d's communication faithfully.) In G-d's two subsequent references to His command He sets the record straight, specifically using the term צִוִּיתִיךָ, "I commanded you" (3:11,17).

Indeed, in each part of the woman's response and in every aspect of it, she engages in misinterpretation and distortion, unconscious perhaps, but displaying several major shortcomings, including:

- a) Carelessness with G-d's command
- b) Lack of satisfaction with her portion
- c) Infatuation with the prohibited

Specifically,

- She misrepresents the fuller perspective of the command, that the area of permissibility was much greater than that of the prohibited. In the command, the statement of what was permissible had immediately preceded the prohibition and was a basic part of the overall formulation. Indeed, G-d had introduced the prohibition with the expansive statement, "From all the trees of the garden *akhel tokhel*" (2:16), "eat, you may eat" implying "heartily." She informs the serpent, "fruit from the garden's trees *nokhel* (3:2), "we may eat," ignoring G-d's initial "all" as well as His doubling of the verb. She expresses a lack of appreciation for the wide range of what is permitted and focuses her interest on the limited scope of what is prohibited; she is enamored of the forbidden.
- She betrays her fascination with the forbidden by speaking of it as the tree אֲשֶׁר בְּתוֹךְ הַגָּן, the one that is in the "midst" of the garden (3:3), imputing to it a centrality not previously mentioned. G-d had merely termed it "the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Bad" (2:17). It was the Tree of Life that He had caused to sprout בְּתוֹךְ הַגָּן (2:9). Her transference of the tree's location reflects her transference of value.

- By accepting the serpent's terminology of אָמַר, ("said"), she downgrades the import of the command.
- In recalling the punishment for transgression, she also lessens the force and impact of G-d's words. G-d said "for on the day you eat from it מוֹת תָּמוּת," meaning "you shall surely die" (2:17) whereas she omits "on the day" and employs the ambiguous פֶּן תָּמּוּתוּן, "lest you die" (3:3), a term that may be understood as "perhaps."
- In citing G-d's command she adds to it the prohibition to touch the tree, which is nowhere hinted at in His formulation. This may have resulted from her fixation with the prohibited fruit and magnifying its scope. Alternatively, it may have expressed superficial conscientiousness; imagining G-d's command to apply to a case that it does not is often counterproductive.

Emboldened by the woman's weak response, the serpent now directly contradicts G-d's words, using a "here and now," physical, definition of death, telling the woman, "You will not die, but G-d knows that the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be as gods knowing good and bad" (3:4-5).

### 3. Transgression and Punishment

That was all she had to hear. In the following verse she is depicted as going through a frenetic process of rationalization, focusing on the temptation and forgetting her responsibility. She sees that "the tree was good for eating, that it was a passion to the eyes and the tree was desirable as a means to perception" (v. 6). Each clause seems to stand for another aspect of human longing, perhaps those of physical appetite, aesthetic pleasure and the drive for increased insight. She had also heard from the serpent that upon eating they would advance to a state comparable to a god.

She eats of the forbidden fruit and gives it to her husband, inviting him to join her. (The otherwise superfluous word עִמָּהּ, "with her," seems to imply that she did not want to be alone in sin.) Without further ado we are told "and he eats." In his case there was no multifaceted, mighty internal struggle. The Torah seems to be reflecting the point that those who are in

close contact with an individual who went through the rationalization process to sin are themselves more liable to follow suit than would otherwise have been the case.

Their eyes are opened and they do, indeed, receive some sort of additional knowledge, best explained as a new perspective on things. The text delicately portrays the content of knowledge that derives from the forbidden tree as different from the knowledge man received directly from G-d. In the verse immediately preceding the episode with the serpent, the man and woman were described as being naked and not being ashamed (2:25); the verse immediately following the sin relates that they sensed their nakedness and sewed fig leaves into body-coverings with which to conceal their nakedness. Surely this cannot be thought of as comprising the totality of the difference but as emblematic of the contrast. We will discuss this shortly.

When the couple detect G-d's presence moving around in the garden, they hide among the trees, indicating a guilty conscience and a desire to evade Him. When G-d specifically calls to the man, "Where are you?" (3:9), the man answers that he is afraid to face Him in his nakedness. Despite the fig-leaf loincloth he was wearing, Adam still felt naked and unable to stand in G-d's presence. Obviously, his new knowledge, with his new perspective on things, was an impediment to interacting with G-d.

G-d draws the relevant conclusion, expressed in His follow-up questions: "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree concerning which I instructed you not to eat from?" (3:11). In other words, Have you received information (and a new way of thinking about things) from the source I commanded you to avoid?

Adam had first attempted to evade confronting the reality of his action, but ultimately he has no choice but to respond to G-d's question regarding his sin. He blames "the woman that You placed with me, she gave me..." (3:12). In this complex response, by adding "that You placed with me," we may detect that in his great desire to acquit himself, in addition to pointing to the woman, he also shamelessly and ungratefully hints that some of the blame falls on G-d Himself, for after all it is He who provided man his

mate! The woman blames the seductive serpent. But G-d makes clear that there is personal accountability as He ignores all excuses. Humankind must exercise discipline to resist temptation and so He decrees retribution. Symbolizing His great compassion and ongoing concern for human welfare even in the post-Eden state, He then fashions proper clothing for the couple and dresses them (3:21).

The Torah does not portray Adam's knowledge, maturity and discernment as beginning with his partaking of the forbidden fruit. He definitely possessed these faculties, undoubtedly including an understanding of marriage and sex, prior to the transgression. This is borne out by his activities and responses before the transgression and by G-d's plans for him at that early stage of "innocence." Consider: G-d brought to Adam all the creatures He created for the assignment of names and Adam assigned appropriate names to each; Adam did not find a fitting mate until woman was created; when she was presented to him he immediately recognized her suitability. At that point, the nature of the marriage union, and of future husband-wife unions, was proclaimed. Above all, the very fact that G-d commanded him, granted him free will and held him responsible for sinning indicates maturity and a significant level of comprehension.

Clearly, Adam possessed a full measure of understanding before ingesting the forbidden fruit. The critical feature that distinguishes his state before committing the sin from after appears to be the varied perspective on life that came with partaking of the fruit, which is associated with a degree of alienation from G-d.

Thus, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad represents a source of knowledge detached from G-d, one which He does not want man to partake of. His placing this tree in the garden and creating the sly serpent represent His having granted man free will. His hope for man in the first instance is that he should choose to remain fully attached to Him and cognizant of his dependence on Him. Man's relationship with G-d should be acknowledged and everpresent in all his pursuits and achievements and he should not turn to the "alien culture" of the forbidden fruit. That is how it would be in an ideal world.

G-d declares to His heavenly retinue that man has now become “as one of us knowing good and bad” (3:22) and decrees that humans will no longer be permitted to partake of the Tree of Life. He evicts man from the Garden of Eden and blocks the entrance with *kerubim* and the flame of the revolving sword (3:24).

The situation of man after the transgression, with his new knowledge and perspective, when he can no longer stand in G-d’s presence in purity and innocence, is one in which he is no longer permitted to benefit from the eternal life that the Tree of Life affords and from the comforts of the Garden of Eden. Bodily immortality and the ready availability of his needs would stand in the way of his recognition of his need to seek redemption. That his status is described as god-like refers to the huge measure of freedom, autonomy and power that his new perspective conferred upon him, allowing him to think of himself, in his sphere of life, as a god. Therefore, in this state, feeling his personal, independent grandeur, he must be subject to the harsh exigencies of the world so that he will have to acknowledge and cope with his true reality. Man’s punishment was that the earth would now be cursed for him, sprouting forth thorns and thistles, requiring great toil to succeed. He will have to “work the land from which he was taken” (3:23). He will be compelled to confront his mortality and vulnerability and be prompted to recognize his dependence on G-d.

The verse immediately following the account of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden relates that Adam and Eve engaged in procreation (4:1). Although this does not imply that we should understand the Eden parable as representing a stage of human relations when sexual relations were not practiced, one may wonder: Is procreation considered the post-Eden counterpart to bodily immortality?

Some thinkers have regarded the very condition of mortality, with its constant inducement to appreciate the value of each moment, to complete what must be completed and correct what must be corrected before it is too late, to be the factor that endows human life with its infinite value and spurs man to aspire to great

spiritual heights. Perpetuation through children, properly nurtured, and contributing to a better future, can be an ongoing process of endlessly elevating human society.

The great importance attached to covering nakedness is ultimately associated with the fear of raw human emotions. In a fully G-d-centered and spiritually attuned world, man would have no fear or even awareness of nakedness’ special status, meaning human exploitation would not exist and society would be violence-free. A whole new set of norms became necessary after the transgression.

To summarize: Adam and Eve represent human beings in all times and places. The tree of the solitary commandment represents G-d’s demand from humankind that they exercise their free will to submit to His will, the serpent symbolizes the ever-present temptation facing all human beings and the woman’s dialogue with the serpent illuminates the all-too-familiar phenomenon of human rationalization. Adam’s quick acquiescence to his wife’s offering him the forbidden fruit represents the danger of a sinful human environment, his response to G-d illustrates human attempts at evasion and self-justification, which are ultimately futile, and his eviction from the garden represents a degree of estrangement from G-d. Despite their transgression, G-d has great concern for Adam and Eve.

Man’s sins stem from rationalizations that “allow” temptation to succeed. This includes not recognizing one’s dependence on G-d and improperly relating to Him and His commands. In a clear, beautiful and compelling manner, this allegory speaks to all men in every age about the most significant topic in life – their relationship with G-d. It addresses our need to remember who and what we really are.

Insight into the complementary area of man’s relationship with his fellow man – through an allegory also set in the primeval history of human existence – is provided in the following chapter.