

KNOW YOUR LIMITS

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

If there ever was an episode in Chumash that screamed for an allegorical explanation, the *etz hadaas* is it. It is simply inconceivable that some fruit introduced death to Man, and another would convey immortality to him – and that against the wishes of the Creator! That eating from this second fruit presented so much of a problem to G-d, that He had to see to it that Man was swiftly ushered out of the Garden. (It should be noted that the fact that the names of the trees are not given itself suggests that we are not dealing with ordinary trees.) More fundamentally, why would Hashem in His goodness withhold the gift of knowledge from people?

The entire episode, it seems to me, concerns itself with human comprehension and its limits. In our efforts to understand the world around us, we search endlessly, and realize that we have not achieved even a drop in the sea of knowledge. Those who toil to a quest to understand everything only become frustrated, as they realize that with greater understanding they are even further from their goal than when they began.

We should be able to conclude from this that trying to comprehend the nature of Hashem is even more fraught, and impossible to achieve. As finite, limited human beings, we have no way of understanding what Hashem is. When we insist that we have no choice, and we must try to understand Him as best as we can, we run the risk of hitting upon notions that are not just wrong, but heretical. In some cases, people's inability to determine for themselves just what Hashem is leads them to the conclusion that He does not exist! Our dogged insistence that we must understand is as unreasonable as trying to teach a horse to speak. Rather than chase the impossible, we should serve Hashem in simplicity, responding to His commands without asking too many "whys."

The Tree of Knowledge represents the pursuit of complete comprehension. The Tree of Life represents the desire to live fully and enjoy the gifts of this world. They do not work well together. When Man does not exceed his limits, he can live happily and contentedly in a physical, material world. Should he fall into the trap of intellectual overreach, however, he will know no peace or contentment. The gift of the Tree of Life will necessarily evade him.

Man was given the ability and the chance to live in this world free of tension. All was available to him. The Tree of Life, i.e. the opportunity to engage the world contentedly, was fully available to him. But he would not be able to enjoy it if he ate as well from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad, i.e. if he pursued knowledge that he believed would be good for him, but is quite the opposite.. It he would insist on comprehending matters that were beyond his ability to understand, he would give

up the possibility of living with clarity and euphoria. In effect, death would ensue, in the sense that Man would give up the life free of intellectual and spiritual stress that he was born into. The gift of the Tree of Life would evade him.

Adam understood why Hashem had prohibited the pursuit of the unattainable. It resonated so well, that when he passed along the instruction to his wife, he went even further than G-d did. Even touching the tree should be avoided, i.e. even a bit of speculation about the nature of Divinity should be avoided, because the inquiry, once begun, is difficult to contain, and can possibly lead to the same "death" as full-blown immersion in theosophy. (It is unlikely that Chavah made up this detail; it is more likely that she repeated to the Serpent what her husband had told her.) Hence, Chavah told the Serpent that they were forbidden to touch the tree "lest" they die – stressing that this was only a possibility, rather than a certainty – as "touching" alone was not as dangerous as unrestricted access.

The Serpent shrugged off Chavah's argument. It was preposterous to think that knowledge was dangerous. To the contrary, he said. Indulge. You will become more like Him – and He has no problem at all with all that knowledge! He is not diminished or disturbed by it. Neither will you, he insisted.

The appeal and allure of that knowledge overwhelmed Adam and Chavah. They bought into the Serpent's argument, and they began searching and exploring. The result was nothing but frustration. They realized that they were "naked," that they had attained nothing but confusion. They could not comprehend the nature of Divinity; their perception of Him became more fluid and uncertain. They hid from Him, because their grasp of who He is had changed so much that they could think He was unaware of some things – that absolute knowledge of all things was not part of His nature. So they "hid" before this corrupted new image of Him that they held up before themselves.

They hid only from the "presence" of G-d, i.e. from what is "before" Him – the *a priori* certainty of His existence that could be (or so they first hoped) verified rationally. They could not reject Him entirely, because they were left with all that comes "after" him, i.e. His deeds and creations. (This is what Adam meant when he told Hashem "I heard Your voice in the Garden." While I failed at achieving the rational grasp that I sought, I heard Your voice nonetheless. Your deeds amount to a thunderous announcement of Your presence and role in this world.) Looking at the evidence of His presence and His handiwork that He leaves behind, Adam could not escape the conclusion that there is a First Cause and Creator.

Vulnerable, frustrated and unhappy, Adam and Chavah believed that they would be able to free themselves of any guilt. What was their sin? They had merely followed their consciences! They could not help but to think, and their thoughts took them where they did. Can Man be compelled to believe what he does not?

Here was an argument that potentially could spare countless people who would reach heretical conclusions! But it was not accepted. Hashem asked Adam who had led him to engage in this

dangerous inquiry. Adam pointed to Chavah. He meant that Hashem had thrust the two of them together. As the two of them explored their new world, and reflected on who they were and how they got there, they naturally began thinking about G-d, and soon became trapped by their own conclusions. Surely they should not be dealt with harshly for this?

G-d upended their argument. You cannot argue, He said, that your conclusions were compelled. Who compelled you to embark on your dangerous journey? No one and nothing but your own choice. You insisted on understanding in your own terms what human beings are not capable of understanding.

And so Man's brief period of utopian bliss came to an end. The spirit of inquiry which he had absorbed would not allow any but the most boorish of people to find genuine satisfaction with all the earthly delights available. Should anyone try to do so, cherubs dangling revolving swords would threaten him, thereby blocking his way back to Eden, which means "delight." Man would not be able to take refuge in earthly pleasures to escape a constant succession of mortal fears.

1. Based on Meleches Machsheves by R. Moshe Cheifetz, 1663-1711 .