

# FORBIDDEN FRUIT - THE GOOD AND THE BAD

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

A defining moment in the history of humanity takes place on the sixth day of creation, when Adam and Chava (Eve) partake of the fruit of the "Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad," betraying Hashem's commandment to them to refrain from eating the fruit of that tree. In the beginning of the Rambam's (Maimonides') Moreh Nevuchim ("Guide for the Perplexed" section 1 chapter 2), the author raises "an extraordinary question that a learned man asked me some years ago:"

On the one hand, it seems that the consequences of eating the forbidden fruit were catastrophic: Man was banished from Gan Eden (the Garden of Eden), and death and pain became our lot upon the earth. Yet on the other hand, it seems that as a result of their eating the fruit something exceptional transpired. The snake tempted Chava by saying, "On the day that you eat from it, your eyes will be opened, and you'll be like G-d, knowing good and bad. (3:5)" And that's exactly what happened: "And Hashem said, 'Behold, Man has become like one of us - knowing good and bad.' (3:22)" The snake's argument actually materialized!

In other words, it seems that before partaking of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, man was functionally comparable to an animal, acting in response to instinct, without knowledge of good and bad. It was only through partaking of the forbidden fruit that man elevated his status above that of the animals, and was able to live a life that discerned between good and bad!

The Midrash (see Sefer Chassidim hotza'as Mekitzei Nirdamim #5) tells the story of a certain Torah scholar who, while strolling in the forest, encountered a simple Jew. To his amazement, this Jew would jump from one side of a small river to the other, crying out "Tamei - Defiled!" as he did so. Then he would jump back across the river, once again calling out "Tamei!" This process repeated itself numerous times, the Jew all along oblivious to the fact that he was being observed. Eventually unable to restrain his curiosity, the scholar approaches the man. "Tell me, if you please, what exactly are you doing?"

"I am a simple man," he answered. "My only desire is to serve Hashem with all my heart, and praise Him for all the good He does. Yet I have no knowledge, and I don't even know how to read Hebrew so that I may pray to Him and praise Him. Thankfully, though, I remember one word from my childhood - Tamei. So I jump across this river, and with all my soul I praise Hashem with the only word I know."

"Do you know what the word Tamei means?" the scholar asked. "It's not a nice word. It's a word you

use to describe something unclean and impure. You can't praise Hashem with such an unpleasant word! Come, let me teach you a word with which you can truly praise Hashem - the word 'Tahor - pure!' Just one word - but infinitely more appropriate."

It took the simple Jew quite some time before he had mastered his new knowledge, but eventually he learned to pronounce the word Tahor, and practiced jumping across the river with his new word. It didn't feel quite right, but the scholar assured him that with time, he'd come to love the new word. "And besides, you just can't praise Hashem by saying Tamei!"

The next morning, the simple Jew awoke with a burning desire to serve and praise Hashem. He went to the river, all excited to use his new word. Yet as he got ready to jump, he realized he couldn't remember it anymore. What's worse, his simple mind became so confused that he no longer remembered the old word either. Try as he may, he just couldn't jar the recesses of his memory. He sat down on the river bank and began to cry bitter tears. How could he ever praise Hashem?

In the Heavenly court a tumult was brewing. The strange yet sincere ways of this simple Jew had given Hashem immense pleasure, and now he was no longer able to serve Hashem as he once had. It was decreed that the scholar must be informed of his wrongdoing, and he must return to the forest and remind the simple Jew the word "Tamei" so that he could once again serve Hashem as he had.

Before their sin, explains the Rambam, Adam and Chava didn't know "good" and "bad." Were they thus like the animals? No! To the contrary, they were highly ethical beings capable of discerning "right" from "wrong." If not, how could Hashem expect them not to take from the Eitz Ha-Da'as?! Consider this: Right and wrong are ethical terms; good and bad are the vocabulary of taste and desire. Before sin, all of creation was "good" - both the pure and the impure. Physical desire was simply a medium through which to serve Hashem. Today, it is a negative drive we must contend with - one that has the capacity to cause man to stray from the path of righteousness and truth. In the aftermath of the sin, our physicality became a liability with which we are destined to struggle and wrestle as long as we live. I believe this is the hidden meaning of the verse (Koheles/Ecclesiastes 7:29), "G-d created man simple; yet they sought many intrigues." Today, it is only the purest of souls who can serve Hashem with Tamei! For most of us, it's a life-long battle to distance ourselves from Tamei and integrate Tahor.

Man can't turn back the clock. The paradigm shift brought about by the original sin is a done deal; we are left to pick up its pieces and make the best out of what we've been given. When the previous Bobover Rebbe zt"l would relate the above Midrash, he would muse: "We can't, after all, serve Hashem with Tamei. We know better than that. Yet how fortunate we are that we can praise Hashem with Tahor! 'Ve-Taher libeinu le-ovdecha be'emes - Purify our hearts, Hashem, so that we may serve You with truth!'"

Have a good Shabbos.

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