

# A TREE GREW IN MANHATTAN

*by Rabbi Aron Tendler*

Let's review the most ancient of stories.

In the beginning G-d created.. The First Day He created light and separated it from darkness.

On the Second Day He made the firmament to separate between the upper and lower waters.

On the Third Day He separated the dry land from the seas and blanketed the land with seed bearing vegetation.

On the Fourth Day He placed the sun and the moon and sprinkled the heavens with countless galaxies.

On the Fifth Day He filled the seas with fish and the skies with fowl.

On the Sixth Day He created the animals of the earth culminating with the creation of Adam the first human creature.

The Seventh Day became Shabbos, the zenith of creation.

However, that was just the beginning. The story relates in much greater detail the creation and location of Gan Eden (Garden of Eden) the creation of the human, and Adam and Chava's fall from grace.

In the middle of the garden stood two trees. One was the Tree of Life and the other was the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. G-d took the human that he had created and placed him (or it) in the garden to discover His greatness and spread his understanding of G-d's will. The human creature Adam was instructed, "You may eat from all the trees of the Garden; however, on penalty of death do not eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil."

G-d knew that the human creature was lonely. So, He instructed Adam to study all the animals of the forest and thereby realize that he alone was unique among the animal kingdom.

Adam alone was gifted with freewill and the ability to emulate the Creator by caring and doing for others without expecting anything in return for his kindness. First of all there was nothing that the human could have needed that G-d had not already provided; and secondly, caring and doing for others was the only way to emulate G-d. By the time Adam had finished "naming all the animals in the forest" he understood that his mate had not yet been created.

G-d caused Adam to fall into a deep sleep and He separated the first human creature called Adam into two equal components of male and female. The male component remained with the name Adam and the female component was named Chava.

Adam and Chava were physically naked but they were not ashamed. Sin had not yet entered onto the stage of history and all that G-d had created reflected the pristine purity and sanctity of G-d's intentions. It would only be at the point that Adam and Chava did as they wished in opposition with G-d's wishes that sin would take its rightful place among humans. At that point the human would experience shame. As we will see, not the shame of being unclothed but the shame of having tarnished the pristine purity of G-d's perfect creation. They would feel naked - bereft of G-d's trust.

The Nachash (serpent) was sent to entice Chava and Adam to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. He fixed his evil eye on Chava and succeeded in having her taste the forbidden fruit. Chava then enticed Adam to do the same and the one taste "opened up their eyes to the fact that they were naked."

Rashi, referencing the Medresh, explained that their "opening of the eyes" was not in the literal sense. "It wasn't as if they did not know that they were without clothes. Even a blind man knows when he is or isn't wearing clothes." The meaning of "opened up their eyes" is that they were naked of the one Mitzvah that G-d had commanded them. Their purity in never having sinned would never be again.

This requires a second look.

G-d had commanded Adam and Chava one and only one Mitzvah. They were forbidden to eat from the two trees in the center of the garden. It was a commandment that could only be kept by not eating. The moment they ate from the forbidden fruit they transgressed the one Mitzvah they had been commanded and could no longer do that Mitzvah! More so, G-d then chased them out of Gan Eden so that they weren't even able to willfully not eat from the second tree, the Tree of Life.

Imagine living in a world where there were no Mitzvos. Imagine living in a world where you do not know how to serve your G-d, your Master, or how your G-d and Master wishes to be served

I recall meeting with a non-Jew who had accepted to live his life by the Seven Noahide Laws. He explained that he was the loneliest person he knew. On the one hand he did not feel that he belonged to the non-Jewish world because they did not share his belief in G-d, the Torah, and the primacy of the Jewish people. On the other hand, he did not feel that he belonged to the Jewish world because he was not a Jew and did not really wish to convert. He simply wanted to do and be as G-d had commanded him to do and be.

However, he did feel that he was more gifted than the other non-Jews of the world because he at least belonged in some exclusive way to G-d's world. He at least woke up in the morning and went to sleep at night knowing that he was doing the will of G-d. He felt he had a purpose and a direction

no matter how lonely he felt.

Adam and Chava, at the moment they transgressed and ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Bad, realized that they no longer had an exclusive way to serve their Creator. They were naked of Mitzvos! Even if they would repent and beg G-d for forgiveness they would never again be able to perform that first exclusive Mitzvah gifted to them by G-d. They realized that they were naked of Mitzvos!

In the aftermath of September 11th America entered into their own realization of their own nakedness. I do not mean the obvious and inescapable realization that our illusions of safety and security were the stuff of fantasy and dreams. I mean the realization that our generation was naked of Mitzvos!

I will explain.

On Rosh Hashana I spoke about the absolutes of Good and Evil. As a generation raised with the perverted notion that there are no perpetrators of evil - that there are only victims, the notion of evil had disappeared. There was no real evil in the world. Everything could be explained, rationalized, justified, psychoanalyzed, and excused. One man's freedom fighter was another man's terrorist. It all depended on whose shoes you happen to be wearing at that moment in time and destiny. An absolute scale of Good and Bad did not exist. All things were circumstantially mandated and generationally open to reinterpretation.

However, our generation could not escape the conclusion that the destruction on September 11th could not be explained, rationalized, justified, psychoanalyzed, or excused. We had to accept that we had just witnessed absolute evil. We had just witnessed an evil that was not subject to circumstance or reinterpretation.

Once the immediate shock wore off and the pain and the fear began to set-in, a religious renewal seemed to emerge from the pit of the destruction. Record attendances in places of worship all over the country and the world were reported. What exactly were these "lost souls" searching for?

The many social commentators have suggested that people were turning to religion for comfort and solace. The panacea of religious devotion and fervor was once again pulled out of the divine medicine bag.

I would like to suggest a more profound explanation.

I believe that the destruction of the Twin Towers was our generation's eating from the forbidden fruit.

We were a generation that refused to believe in absolute evil and therefore also did not believe in absolute good. Just as one man's evil was another man's sad and unfortunate childhood, so too one man's good was no more absolute. That too was a product of childhood experiences, whether

positive or negative. What was good and absolute for one was not necessarily good or absolute for another.

All of a sudden we were confronted with irrefutable proof of absolute evil. Along with our confrontation with absolute evil came the realization that there must therefore also be absolute good. However, as a generation that had excused the absolutes of good and evil we did not know what absolute good was. That is why so many have turned to the one supposed source of good. That is why they turned to religion.

In the center of the Garden there stood two trees. One was the Tree of Life and the other the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Humanity ate from the forbidden fruit and they knew that they no longer knew how to do or be good.

At the end of Manhattan there stood Twin Towers. They represented the illusions of security and power. Evil attacked the two towers and they crumbled to the ground. Humanity looked upon the senseless destruction and knew that there was absolute evil. They also knew that there had to be absolute good, but they had forgotten what that was.

Thank You our Master and King for giving us Your Torah for it is our life and the length of our days and we will engage in its study day and night.

Thank You G-d for gifting us with the Tree of Life. We may have wanted to forget that humanity is capable of absolute evil; however, through Your Torah You have gifted us with the ability to know absolute good and do absolute good.

How great is G-d and how great are His children!

May we all merit to see the coming of redemption quickly and in our lifetimes!

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