

PARSHAS BEREISHIS: CRIME, PUNISHMENT, AND A WEEKLY GIFT

by Rabbi Yaakov Horowitz

One of the puzzling aspects of the initial sin of Adam and Chava was the fact that they were not given the punishment that Hashem clearly declared when He informed them of the prohibition. The Torah notes that Hashem told Adam and Chava that they are free to enjoy the fruits of any of the other trees. However, they must not partake from the fruit of the eitz hada'as, for if they do, "On the day you eat of it (the fruit of the eitz hada'as) you shall surely die (Bereishis 2:17)."

When they sinned and in fact did eat from the forbidden fruit, they received a number of punishments and were banished from Gan Eden. But did not lose their lives "on that day." The question arises; why did Hashem not administer the punishment that he had so clearly stated to them?

One way to explain this apparent inconsistency is by noting that the lack of the immediate implementation of the punishment was certainly not incongruent with the words of Hashem that they would die on the day they ate from the forbidden fruit. They were both supposed to live forever, as part of Hashem's plan. They were informed that they would eventually die after they ate the fruit of the Eitz Hada'as (Bereishis 3:19). Just like placing a man on death row announces to all that this individual is condemned to death, so too, removing Adam and Chava from Gan Eden and informing them of their impending mortality meant that they began their inexorable march to their demise following their sin.

Rabbi Betzalel Rudinsky, Rosh Yeshiva, Yeshivas Ohr Reuvain, offers a deeper insight into the words of the Torah - and the punishment of Adam and Chava. He explains that it was the initial intention of Hashem that Adam and Chava remain in Gan Eden and experience the exponential spiritual growth that the Mishnah (Ukzim 12:3, see others) describes in such vivid terms. They were to bask in the glow of Hashem's Shechinah (Divine Presence) forever and grow close to Him. After they sinned, this spiritual Gan Eden was reserved for a later time - after the arrival of Mashiach.

Looking at things in these terms, it is easy to understand why Hashem referred to 'immediate death' when noting the punishment that would result if they ate from the Eitz Hada'as. They lived for hundreds of years following their sin, but were denied the opportunity to live the 'Gan Eden' of never-ending spiritual development. Living without purpose is a life unfulfilled - and in the larger scheme of things, similar to death.

Rabbi Rudinsky tied this approach to the beautiful thoughts of the Vilna Gaon on the âRetzei' tefilah that we recite during the birchas hamazon of Shabbos. The Gaon asks several questions on this tefilah. Why do we mention "shelo tehei tzorah ... b'yom menuchaseinu (there shall be no distress or grief during our day of rest)?" Why would we think that there would be anguish on the day of Shabbos? Why do we request this level of tranquility specifically on Shabbos?

The Gaon explains that a person always needs to be focused on productive endeavors. Spending blocks of time without responsibility and focus is counterproductive and dangerous - to one's body and soul. Shabbos, explains the Gaon, is a small slice of Gan Eden (as we say in the Shabbos zemiros, "M'ein Olam Haba'ah yom Shabbos menucha)," an opportunity to pursue our spiritual growth without the distractions of work and mundane matters. However, when not utilized properly, it can result in laxity and all the dangers that come with large blocks of unfocused time. We therefore thank Hashem for the gift of Shabbos and pray that we be free of the distress and grief that come with poor use of such time.

Adam and Chava squandered their endless Shabbos - their opportunity to dwell in the presence of Hashem forever.

We are offered a small slice of this Gan Eden each week. We must make every effort to take full advantage of this precious gift.

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