



## CHUMASH THEMES CLASS #3



RECONSTRUCTING THE DRAMA  
OF THE TREE AND THE SNAKE.

 **READ** GENESIS 2:15 – 3:34

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## Introduction

The events of Adam and Eve's sin are well known. After their creation on Friday, God gives them exactly one commandment: "Eat from all the trees of the Garden, but do not eat from the Tree of Knowledge at the center of the Garden" (Genesis 2:16-17). Eve is convinced by the snake to eat, and she in turn convinces Adam to eat. At this point, Adam and Eve "realize" they are naked and hide. God seemingly "searches" for them, and they are punished and exiled from the Garden of Eden.

In the book, *Duties of the Heart*, Rabbeinu Bachya, a philosopher from the 11th century "golden era" of Spanish Jewry, makes the following observation: The most difficult parts of Torah are those which are *most* familiar. Since we think we already know them from childhood stories, we do not delve into them with the depth that is appropriate for such weighty and complex issues.<sup>1</sup>

Our goal for this essay, therefore, is to relearn this most familiar of all stories, by discussing:

- 1) What was so special about the Tree? Was eating from it so serious? And how do the consequential punishments flow from this action?
- 2) Who or what was the snake?
- 3) Why does God call out to Adam after the sin, "Where are you?"

## The Tree

Let us begin by describing the Tree, formally known as the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The word for knowledge, *da'at*, is used later to describe the marital union between Adam and Eve. Therefore

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<sup>1</sup> Duties of the Heart 8:3:24

an alternative translation might be: the Tree of Union Between Good and Evil.<sup>2</sup>

And this is the crux of the matter: When God created the world, He clearly defined right from wrong. All moral issues were objective and not subjective. There was one, obvious, absolute morality. True, one could choose to do the wrong thing, but that choice was clear.

Yet God did create one place of moral confusion: the Tree. Eating from the Tree would actually internalize a confusion between right and wrong. Avoiding this fate was Adam and Eve's one mitzvah to observe. And were they to refrain from eating – i.e. from entering that state of confusion – the world would have reached its ultimate completion. Mankind would have been immortal; forever in Paradise.

The Tree had a tremendous alluring power, primarily in how it affected the senses: Eve first listens to the snake's seduction. She is then attracted to the look of the tree. She then takes the fruit in hand and tastes it. As the verses say: "And when the woman saw that the tree was... a delight to the eyes... she took of the fruit, and did eat..." (Genesis 3:6).

When Adam and Eve eat from the tree, it triggers a new modus operandi for the entire human experience: The senses become more powerful than the intellect. And because all sensory delights are by nature subjective, at this point man's frame of reference becomes personal rather than universal. Thus each person feels empowered to decide for themselves between right and wrong, and moral confusion enters the world.

## Consequences of Sin

To further appreciate this fusion of good and evil, let's look at the consequences of the sin:

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<sup>2</sup> see Rabbeinu Bachya – commentary to Genesis 4:1

1) Adam is told that the fields will produce not only grain, but also weeds. Originally, when you planted wheat, you got only wheat.<sup>3</sup> But when Adam chose to enter a state of confusion between right and wrong, God responded by fusing good and bad into the very fabric of the natural world. Just as my choice to plant wheat produces a mixture of weeds, so too in the moral realm: I may think I'm making the correct choice, but in fact I may be misled toward a path of moral corruption.

2) Eve is told that her children will be born and raised with pain. Why should this natural human activity require such anxiety and effort? The reason is that before the sin, all human activities were value neutral. Just as breathing is essential for life and is done naturally and without fanfare, so too all other bodily needs such as procreation and childbirth were done in the same manner. Only when wisdom was confused with sensual desire, did our natural activities become more difficult. The process of procreation is the most sensual of all human activities; therefore, this realm became mixed with physical and emotional trauma.

## Attaining Wisdom

Adam and Eve were aware of what they were doing. They knew that that the Tree was off limits. As we said earlier, the delineation between good and evil was quite clear. And it was not that they were lacking anything in the Garden of Eden. So what did they feel was missing?

Adam and Eve lacked the opportunity to actualize their commitment to God by entering a state of challenge and then choosing wisely. They felt that a world that did not allow them to overcome such confusion was a sign of insufficient commitment. So they chose to enter this state willingly.

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<sup>3</sup> Midrash Tanchuma (Kedoshim 7)

It is said that there are two ways to attain wisdom: either to learn about it intellectually, or to acquire it through life experience. From a sensory perspective, the thrill of experience is surely unmatched. But at the same time, it is fraught with danger. Do we really need to experience every drug and every decadent activity to know that it's not for us? For after all, we've all seen how the result of these experiences can carry the danger of permanent physical or emotional scarring.

That is why God's discussion with Adam and Eve after the sin is not about punishment, but about consequence. God says: If this is the choice you are making – the path of challenge – then this is how your life will play out. And as the progenitors of all humanity, Adam and Eve's choices have (unfortunately) affected all their descendants, for all generations.

## The Snake

A very enigmatic figure in this story is the snake. What kind of animal is this that speaks and tempts Adam and Eve? Actually, it is hard for us to imagine the primordial snake, since part of the snake's punishment was a metamorphosis of what and who he is.

Before the sin of Adam and Eve, we find the snake described in detail in the Bible. He is depicted as "cunning," he speaks to Eve, he walks, and he even seems to have his own volition and will. After the sin, he is punished in that he will now crawl on his stomach, his food will be dirt, and there will eternal enmity between himself and man. What was the snake originally, and what did he do to deserve such a downfall?

Most kabbalistic commentators equate the snake with the *Yetzer Hara* – the self-destructive tendencies to move away from God.<sup>4</sup> What is the

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<sup>4</sup> Zohar (Genesis 35b)

function of the *Yetzer Hara*? Why were such tendencies created? And why was a snake chosen to represent this?

The purpose of God's creating the world was to bestow goodness on mankind. The ultimate good is to not give someone a gift, but to empower him to accomplish on his own. Imagine someone training for the Olympics with his coach serving in the role of the opponent. If the coach does not oppose him with all his strength and wiles, the athlete will be upset with him. And when the student manages to overcome the coach, the coach is happy at his own downfall – since it is his role to finally be vanquished.

The *Yetzer Hara* is our coach. Any rational person would desire a worthy opponent to overcome. Therefore the original snake was almost human, walking on legs, speaking intelligently, and able to present a world view alternate to God's. In that sense, the snake is the ultimate servant of God and man. He is the force which gives us the ability to choose between two worldviews – as long as the choice is balanced and the snake is not too difficult to overcome.

When the choice was between intellectual and sensual, the snake needed to be able to tempt man with a sensual experience. However, he needed to clothe it in the guise of the rational and objective truth. Therefore the snake was almost human in his abilities.

When man failed that test, the snake himself needed to undergo a metamorphosis. He needed to become the obstacle and temptation for a different humanity, who now could be easily led astray. Therefore the intelligent rational snake becomes a dirt dwelling mute creature. All his food tastes like earth. He is down in the dirt with no ability to lift himself up, and he cannot even communicate this since he lost his speech. Why?

Originally, the fruits of the trees – representing all levels of pleasure – were accessible to man. There was nothing lacking, as long as the “one command” was observed. Only after the sin could man think that pleasure was to be found outside the service of God. Thus, just as the

snake could not appreciate any pleasure without the dirt with it, so too man cannot appreciate the highest level of spiritual pleasure, unless he has something physical along with it.

This is our opponent, which is appropriate for the world we live in, post-sin.

## **Naked and Bare**

Adam and Eve started out "naked and unashamed" (Genesis 2:25), but after eating from the Tree of Knowledge, "they became aware of their nakedness, and made themselves clothes" (Genesis 3:7).

Why the shift?

Before eating from the Tree, Adam and Eve saw each other first and foremost as souls. They knew the soul is the essence of a human being, with the body serving merely as a protective covering. Since Adam and Eve were focused on the spiritual side, they weren't self-conscious about their bodies.

However, after eating from the Tree, human perception of the physical world changed. The physical senses enticed as if possessing a value of their own. Adam and Eve's "eyes opened" to a focus on the body. The body had become a distraction from the soul and when this happened, Adam and Eve were ashamed of their naked bodies. For a spiritual being, can there be any greater humiliation than to be sized up as something superficially physical?

This explains why animals, who have no divine soul, never feel compelled to put on clothes. But for Adam and Eve, the body needed to be covered, in order to de-emphasize the external, and to let the soul shine through.

## Ashamed Before God

After Adam and Eve eat and realize the catastrophic change that they have caused in the world, they try to hide from God. God figuratively comes looking for them, and calls out into the void of the world, "Adam, where are you?" Yet doesn't God know where they are? And do Adam and Eve really think they can hide?

Adam and Eve are embarrassed by their nakedness, but this time it's not the physical lack of clothing. It is the shame to be in front of God. They have failed in the one task given to them, and are now "naked," devoid of mitzvot.

Adam and Eve know that God has every right to deal with them harshly. But that is not God's approach. He offers them a chance to correct. If Adam and Eve will willingly come to God and acknowledge their mistake, that itself can trigger a reversal of the damage done. This is the concept of teshuva: acknowledging one's mistake, and undertaking not to do it again.<sup>5</sup>

God would like to give Adam and Eve a chance to own up to their actions. But instead, Adam blames Eve, and Eve blames the snake. And so, God must implement the painful consequences, with the goal of correcting the defective behavior.

The story of the Tree of Knowledge is the ongoing story of humanity. We are convinced of the correctness of our actions. And when we err, God presents another chance to realize and admit our mistake. If we do, we draw closer to God than ever before. But if we egotistically defend our position, then we further carve an identity separate from God, putting us outside the true reality.

Even though at first Adam and Eve did not choose correctly, we still can. And in doing so, we can rectify that seminal sin, and bring about a return to Eden, the utopian era for which we all so desperately yearn.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Maimonides (Teshuva 2:2)

<sup>6</sup> Rav Pe'alim (Sod Yesharim" 17); Ben Ish Chai (Torah Lishma 472)