



# Carnegie Shul Chatter

October 14, 2020



## Just a Simple Story? No Way!

The simple version of the story goes like this: Adam and Eve were in the Garden of Eden. God told them they could eat anything they wanted except for the fruit on the Tree of Knowledge. The serpent came and tempted Eve. She ate the apple. She convinced Adam to do the same. They tried to lie to God about what they had done. God threw them out of the Garden.

A good summary of the story, but there is a lot more to it. Below are two articles that explore the deeper meaning, from *aish.com* and *chabd.org*.

### Don't Give In

If only Eve, or Chava, hadn't eaten that apple, or fig, or whatever it was.

Temptation is always before us. We are commanded not to covet, but how many of us can truly say we do not covet? Haven't you ever wished you could have a shiny new sports car like your neighbor? Or as nice a lawn as your neighbor? Or to go on a trip to a tropical get away like your neighbor did? Or to be able to send your kids to a better college?

Yes, we all have been tempted. We all have coveted. But where we really get ourselves into trouble is when we act on those temptations. What if Eve had wanted to eat the fruit of the tree but had refrained?

What if the criminal had wanted that car that he couldn't afford, but instead of stealing it had just sighed wistfully and gone about his business?

What if those folks who wanted their kids to go to a college they weren't qualified to attend hadn't paid someone off to get the kids in?

There are a lot of things that we know we shouldn't do. The trick is to avoid temptation, be satisfied with our lot in life, and push temptation aside.

Count your blessings. Be thankful for what God has given you. The grass is probably not any greener on the other side of the fence.

# Adam, Eve and the Elephant in the Room - Serpents of Desire, Part 1

by Rabbi David Fohrman

## Why would God want to withhold a knowledge of good and evil from us?

Okay, you've taken some time to re-read the story of Adam, Eve and the Snake. Hopefully, you've read it with fresh eyes, and asked yourself that very basic of questions: "What is strange about this picture?" Before getting to your conclusions, let's take a moment to revisit the basic storyline together. In a nutshell, here it is:

After creating a world, God fashions two human beings and places them in paradise, the Garden of Eden. He gives them virtually free reign over the territory. There's only one restriction: A certain tree is off-limits — it's the tree labeled "the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil". The fruit of this tree must not be eaten under any circumstances.



In short order, the human beings manage to transgress the only prohibition given to them. At the behest of a mysterious snake, Eve eats from the tree and shares the fruit with Adam. The Almighty becomes angry, and hands out various punishments: The snake? No more walking upright for him; he must crawl on his belly and eat dust. The woman? Generations of her kind will endure pain in conception and childbirth. And the man? He and his progeny will have to work by the sweat of their brow to make bread. And just to round things out, death gets handed out to all the parties; nobody gets to live forever anymore.

Eden is placed off-limits; everyone has got to find somewhere else to live now. The great Lifeguard in the sky has blown His whistle and it's time for everybody to get out of the pool. Why? Because there's another mysterious tree in the Garden — the Tree of Life — and the last thing God wants is anyone taking anything from that tree...

Well, what are the problems here? Does the story sit well with you, or do you find yourself uneasy with it? If you are uneasy, can you identify exactly why you are uneasy?

As I mentioned earlier, many Biblical stories have their "elephant in the room": An obvious, slap-in-the-face question that is so basic and so deeply troubling that until you find a way to deal with it, you really can't claim to have any understanding at all of the story you are reading. Is there a question of this sort — a question of this magnitude — that we need to deal with when reading the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden?

I think there is.

Let's talk a little bit about this mysterious tree in the Garden, the one that God places off-limits. It has a name. It is known as "the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil". By any measure, that's a pretty strange name for a tree — but if that's what the Bible calls it, then that's presumably what it is: It somehow conveys a "knowledge of Good and Evil," an ability to distinguish right from wrong to those who partake of its fruits.



Are human beings better or worse off, for their knowledge of "good and evil"?

But there's a big problem with this. In a sentence, it is this: "Why would God want to deny this knowledge to people?" Think about it. Are human beings better or worse off, for their knowledge of "good and evil"? Is knowing right from wrong an asset or a liability for humanity?

Imagine a world in which people were pretty much the same as they are now — they were smart, they could walk, they could talk, they could drive cars and become investment bankers. They were missing only one thing. They didn't know right from wrong.

We have a word for people like that. We call them sociopaths.

A person with all the faculties we associate with humanity except for the capacity to understand right and wrong is someone who could slaughter people with an axe the way you and I mow the lawn. Did God really want to create a society filled with such people? Clearly, people are better off when they know the difference between right and wrong. So why would God pretend that having such knowledge is undesirable?

A tempting way out of the problem would be to suggest that somehow, it was all a set-up: God really did want people to have the knowledge the tree would give them, and was in fact "glad" when they ate from it. But this approach is deeply problematic. For the way the Torah tells the story, the Almighty seems pretty disappointed with Adam and Eve after they ate from the tree; he in fact punishes them severely. How are we to understand this disappointment? It seems a little perverse to imagine the Almighty secretly chuckling with pleasure that Adam and Eve finally ate the fruit he put off limits - but hiding His joy behind a mask of displeasure and anger.

Clearly, God really did want Adam and Eve to avoid the Tree of Knowledge. But that brings us back to our question: Why would the Lord want to deny humanity an understanding of good and evil?

## Catch-22 in the Garden

The truth is, the question is really even a little deeper than this. It's not simply that it seems strange for God to have put a "tree of knowledge" off-limits to Adam and Eve. Rather, the very existence of such a tree seems to create a basic contradiction in the story as a whole. Here's why:

What happens immediately after Adam and Eve eat from the tree whose mysterious fruits confer knowledge of “good and evil”? The Almighty becomes angry with them and punishes them. But if Adam and Eve were punished for what they did, this presupposes that they knew they did something wrong. You don’t punish people who are unaware that they did something bad. So Adam and Eve evidently had some knowledge of good and evil before eating from the tree. At the very least, they knew it was right to obey God when He told them not to eat, and it was wrong to disobey Him.

But now we’re really stuck. For if Adam and Eve already understood good and evil before reaching for the fruit, well then, they already possessed what the tree was supposed to give them. And that would mean that the tree was useless, nothing but an empty farce.

It’s a catch-22.

This is a very serious, fundamental problem. Didn’t Adam and Eve already have the knowledge the tree was supposed to give them? It’s the kind of question that you should lose sleep over. For as long as you are stuck with this question, the story of Adam and Eve simply fails to make any sense at all.

So how are we to deal with this problem? I’d like to sketch the outline of an approach we may ultimately find useful.

## A World Beyond Good and Evil

Perhaps we’ve been the victim of faulty premises. We’ve casually assumed that we knew what kind of knowledge the Tree gave to Adam and Eve: A knowledge of “good and evil,” of “right and wrong.” But on second thought, just because it’s called a “Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil” doesn’t mean that Adam and Eve were ignorant of morality, of right and wrong, beforehand. It just means that they didn’t call morality “good and evil.” They called it something else.



The approach I am suggesting here is not my own. It in fact is the approach taken by Maimonides, the Rambam. Indeed, in his Guide to the Perplexed, Rambam considers the very same question we have advanced here: Why would God want to withhold a knowledge of good and evil from us? And the answer he gives is this: The tree didn’t give us an understanding of right and wrong when we had none before; rather it transformed this understanding from one thing into another. It transformed it into something called a “knowledge of Good and Evil”.

What would it mean to think about right and wrong in the world of Eden, in the “pre-tree” world? That, indeed, is the \$64,000 question.

If this seems a little obscure, try thinking about it this way: Nowadays, when we do something

right, we think of it as “good”. And when we do something wrong, we think of it as “evil”. But, Rambam contends, those are not the most natural terms one could possibly use. Those terms became relevant to us — they became part of our vocabulary, as it were — only after we ate from the tree and assimilated “knowledge of good and evil”. In the world of Eden, in the world before the Tree, the words “good” and “evil” would have seemed strange and inappropriate. Yes, we would have been aware of right and wrong, but we would not have called this “good and evil”. We would have thought about it differently. We would have called it something else.

What, exactly, was that “something else”? What would it mean to think about right and wrong in the world of Eden, in the “pre-tree” world? That, indeed, is the \$64,000 question. To some extent, we are reaching beyond ourselves to even ask the question. To ask is to try and understand a world we no longer know; a world in which right and wrong looked, felt and seemed vastly different than they do now. But try we must. For the Torah suggests that it was that world which was the more genuine one. And it is to that world that we strive to return.

## Woman and the Forbidden Fruit

*By Chana Weisberg*

The sin of the Eitz Hadaat, the Tree of Knowledge, is one of the most perplexing episodes in the Torah. Insight into the story sheds light on women’s unique qualities and role in the process of redemption.

After Adam’s creation, G-d placed him in the Garden of Eden. Man was permitted to partake in all the delicacies except for one: “From the Tree of Knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat, for on the day you eat of it, you will become deserving of death” (Genesis 2:17). The prohibition of eating from the Eitz Hadaat and the consequence of death upon its violation was intimated for Adam, Chavah (Eve) and their descendants. Although Adam relayed this prohibition to Chavah, she became confused with the directive which then set the stage for the entire episode.



The cunning serpent, who was the embodiment of the evil Satan, asked Chavah whether G-d had forbidden her from eating from any trees in the garden.

Chavah answered, “Of the fruit of any tree in the garden we may eat; only of the fruit of the tree which is in the center of the garden has G-d said ‘You should neither eat of it nor touch it, lest you die.’” Chavah added the prohibition of touching the Tree of Knowledge. The serpent then forcibly pushed Chavah against the tree, and victoriously claimed, “See, just as death did not ensue from touching, so it will not follow from eating.”

In this way, the serpent introduced doubt into Chavah’s mind. It now became easier to dare Chavah to taste the forbidden fruit. He convinced her that G-d did not actually intend to kill

her and Adam, but merely threatened them to intimidate them.



The serpent enticed Chavah by predicting beneficial outcomes. “Your eyes will be opened... The fruit will awaken a new desire and appreciation for the pleasures around you. It will be a source of intellectual benefit.”

Chavah longed for this new knowledge and exciting awakening, and she ate the forbidden fruit. She then used her persuasive powers to convince her husband to eat it as well.

Chavah’s downfall began when she expanded upon and distorted G-d’s command, which she did not personally hear.

The Talmud states that “Ten measures of speech were given to the world; nine of them were allocated to women.”

Is this a statement in praise of woman, or a derogatory one? It can be either. Each of us has the choice and responsibility to determine how to use our communication skills. We have the choice of gossiping, lying, plotting and talking negatively; or, conversely, we can express empathy, understanding, and constructive teaching.

Woman’s extra allotment of speech can have positive or negative ramifications.

Chavah distorted G-d’s command because she did not hear it directly. The command was relayed by Adam and, therefore, was slightly ambiguous to her. Elaborating on the prohibition to include something it did not caused her to eventually be persuaded to sin.

The above explains the circumstances leading Chavah to violate G-d’s word, but her reasoning is still unclear. What intrinsic spiritual changes did Chavah anticipate that were so irresistible?

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Prior to this sin, mankind was not a mixture of good and evil but was innately good; our natural tendency was to do the will of our Maker. Although man possessed free will, temptation came from the outside. Evil, per se, was embodied in the satanic serpent that became a vehicle for temptation.

Man’s mission was to elevate himself to the level where evil would become completely senseless and unappealing. If man, an essentially physical being, chose to ignore temptation, he would elevate the entire physical realm.

Had humanity fulfilled this mission, our purpose would have been achieved by the time the sun had set on the sixth day of creation, at the onset of the world’s first Shabbat. Life would have become an upward spiral of spiritual ecstasy.

Chavah thought she could do better. She understood that overcoming an external temptation is never as great as overcoming an internal one.

By eating the forbidden fruit, Chavah consciously caused temptation to become a part of humanity's make-up. Adam and Chavah became enlightened people; their eyes were open to the evil of the world. They now displayed a desire for base pleasure, despite its harmfulness.

They had thought they could please G-d by resisting this constant inner call to evil. They now realized that they had stripped themselves of the one mitzvah entrusted to them. Then they heard the "voice of G-d withdrawing in the garden"; this was the first tragic withdrawal of the Divine Presence.

Though we cannot fully fathom the cosmic effect of this sin, our long exile became one consequence. Death, as well, became necessary.

Yet man's sin was also part of creation's design. Adam and Chavah were, in a sense, correct in their assumption that the outcome of this sin would ultimately lead to a greater sanctification of G-d's Name.

In the era of Mashiach, once the world reaches its eventual state of purity, humanity will have achieved a greater accomplishment. Once we will have overcome temptation from within, the positive forces will be strengthened. Accordingly, man's reward will be greater, as well.

For this to happen, it was part of the Divine plan that Adam should relay G-d's command to Chavah. Chavah would never have dared to violate a prohibition given to her personally by G-d.

Women are stronger in this aspect of faith. Women's innate humility makes them more conducive to kabbalat ol, accepting the Divine will, regardless of their comprehension of it.

Had Chavah heard the command directly from G-d, she would not have dared to make any further calculation. But we also would not have achieved our ultimate objective of negating an internal evil. Thus, the greater feat would not have been accomplished.

Since woman caused the original taint of sin to become part of humanity's make-up—a sin that will only be removed in the era of Mashiach—she must be the one to correct it. She is entrusted with the responsibility and the privilege of bringing about this ultimate rectification.

The Final Redemption will arrive in the merit of righteous women, who utilize their immense spiritual capabilities for positive endeavors.

## On the Light Side (Every Pun Intended)

