

Forbidden Fruit



Lubavitcher Rebbe

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- *And the woman saw that the tree was good to eat and desirable to the eyes... and she took of its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband, and he ate with her...*
- *To the woman [G-d] said: I will increase your grief and your pregnancy; in sorrow you shall bear children. Your desire will be to your husband, and he will [thus] rule over you.*
- *And to the man He said: ... By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread, till you return to the earth from which you were taken; for dust you are, and unto dust you shall you return.*
- Genesis 3:6-19
- We all know the story of Adam, Eve and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden. The facts are simple enough: among all His creations, G-d created a single creature, man, with the freedom to choose between good and evil, between fulfillment of the divine will and its defiance. Within hours of their creation, the first man and woman chose the latter. They had been commanded not to eat of the fruit of a certain tree, and they violated this commandment.
- With this deed, they profoundly altered the nature of life on earth. The human being, the perfect handiwork of G-d, was perfect no more. A new, alien element--death--entered into life. Man was banished from tranquil Eden to a world where anything of value is achieved only through toil, struggle and pain. The first sin also introduced a new feature of human biology, menstruation, and the resultant laws of *niddah* which render a woman ritually impure from the onset of her menses until she purifies herself by immersing in a *mikvah*.
- What is the connection between death, toil, menstruation and the first sin? First we must examine the significance of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and how our tasting of it affected our nature and the manner in which we realize our mission in life.

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- **A Walled Garden**
- There are two ways in which a person might elevate his surroundings: from above or from within. A leader might be one who leads a life of saintly seclusion, aloof from the coarseness and mundanity of material life, and thereby causes others to aspire to his level; or he might be one who enters into their world, speaks to them in their language, grapples with the petty and the sinister in their lives, and influences them from within. A people might create a model society in a Holy Land, a light unto the nations that inspires admiration and emulation; or they might enter *galut*(exile), disperse to the four corners of the earth, assume, to some degree, the cultures and lifestyles of their hosts, and change the world from within.
- The difference between these two approaches, explains Chassidic teaching, is akin to the difference between the nature of life before and after the first sin of man.
- Evil existed before the first sin, as a requisite part of the divine purpose in creation; for man's mission in life is to separate the gold from the dross, to extract the sparks of holiness imprisoned in the lowly and corporeal elements of creation. Initially, however, evil was something outside of the nature of man, outside of the sphere of his life (thus the evil inclination appears in the form of a distinct creature--the serpent--rather than as a voice in his own heart). The soul of man, his character, his drives and inclinations, his spiritual self and physical self, even his environment and his known universe, were devoid of anything negative or unholy. His refinement of creation was something he would achieve from a point of detached superiority--he would liberate the sparks of holiness from their corporeal imprisonment as a great fire draws sparks to itself from afar. He would annihilate evil (for the moment a spark of goodness is redeemed, its negative shell wilts away like a husk emptied of its fruit) not by engaging it and combating it, but by surmounting it and disdaining it.
- Thus, man was instructed (Genesis 2:15) to work and keep the Garden of Eden, the divinely planted oasis of perfection in the heart of the universe. He was to work the garden, cultivating its inherent goodness, fanning the great flame that would draw sparks from the farthest reaches of creation. He was to keep the garden, guarding its frontiers and preventing the slightest vestige of evil from seeping in or even coming in contact with his sacred world.

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- A Walled Garden
- But man was not content with this tranquil work, with this disinvolved achievement. He was drawn by the lure of the unknown, by the spiritual anti-matter that lay beyond the pale of his world. He was tempted by the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (*Etz haDaat Tov veRa*) that stood in the center of the garden--the tree that offered insight into and affinity with all realms of G-d's creation (the Hebrew word *daat* implies an intimate knowledge of and relationship with the known object, as in the verse, "Adam knew his wife Eve"). He wanted to wrestle with his enemy rather than wage war by remote control from behind walls of unknowing bliss.
- Man chose knowledge over integrity, involvement over perfection, struggle over tranquility. He ate of the forbidden fruit, and the knowledge of evil entered into him. It infiltrated his flesh, entwined itself in his soul, was grafted onto his most basic drives and desires. He was now a foreign body in the Garden of Eden, which promptly ejected him into a world of blurred boundaries, a world where every evil has a trace of good and every good has a trace of evil. Before man tasted of the Tree of Knowledge, evil was something unnatural--something outside of the human experience. But the moment he violated his ignorance of it, it became part and parcel of his nature, if only by awareness and association.
- Man became mortal. Life, by definition, is attachment to G-d, the ultimate and exclusive source of life. When this attachment was absolute and unequivocal, life, too, was without limitation or end. But from the moment man chose to know evil--to relate to that which is contrary to the Divine--his attachment to the eternal was compromised; death gained a hold on him, and begins to drain his life from the moment of his birth.
- No longer the tranquil cultivation of good, human life was redefined as a war with evil: a wrestling match that is also an embrace, a duel in which the enemy claims an intimate corner of the warrior's mind and heart. Life became an arena in which nothing could be achieved without deep personal cost: bread is wrested from the ground only by the sweat of one's brow; children are brought into the world via the agony of love, the misery of pregnancy and the pain of childbirth; and to defeat evil one also must battle oneself, painfully extracting the tentacles of sympathy that have gained inroads into one's soul.

- **The Dynamics of Contact**
- Approximately once a month, at the conclusion of her ovulatory cycle, a woman's body discharges blood. According to Torah law, this discharge renders her a *niddah* for a period of seven days. *Niddah* is a state of spiritual impurity, during which marital relations between husband and wife are forbidden. At the conclusion of the *niddah* period, a woman purifies herself by immersing in a special pool of water called a *mikvah*.
- We usually associate impurity (*tumah*) with negative choices: when a person violates the order that G-d instituted in His world, he disrupts the flow of divine vitality to himself and compromises the sanctity of his body and soul. But menstruation is a most natural phenomenon; why should the natural workings of a person's body be a cause of spiritual impurity?

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- **The Dynamics of Contact**
- Blood is the stuff of life, the vital heat and passion that drives all endeavor and achievement. The impure blood of *niddah* represents the tainting of the passion of life that results from a person's contact with the negative elements of creation. Before the first sin, there was no such contact and no impure blood (as will be the case in the World To Come, when the annihilation of evil will be complete and the impurity of *niddah* will cease). But after we tasted of the knowledge of evil, changing our relationship with it from unknowing distance to intimate engagement, our contact with it cannot but affect us.
- The human body, which retained its intrinsic holiness, naturally ejects this foreign intruder (as the Garden of Eden ejected Adam and Eve after they were tainted by sin). Nevertheless, the body's contact with the impure blood leaves behind a residue of impurity, which is completely erased only upon the woman's reaffirmation of her commitment to G-d through immersion in a *mikvah*. (Immersion in the *mikvah* represents a person's abnegation of self and selfishness in total devotion to the divine will; as Chassidic teaching points out, the Hebrew word *tevillah*, immersion, shares the same letters as *bittul*, self-abnegation.) This cycle of contact, contamination and purification is fated to repeat itself over and over again for as long as we inhabit and interact with an imperfect world, even if our own behavior is beyond reproach, for, as Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi notes in his *Tanya*, one who wrestles with a filthy person is himself dirtied even if he is the victor. The Midrash expresses it thus: If one enters a tanner's shop, even if one doesn't sell him anything or buy anything from him, one departs with a stench on himself and his clothes.

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- **Natural and Not**
- Torah law actually defines two types of contaminating blood: the blood of *niddah* and the blood of *zivah*. A discharge of blood occurring in the normal course of a woman's period renders her a *niddah*. An abnormal discharge occurring during those days of her cycle on which she would normally not see blood is called the blood of *zivah*, and is governed by a different set of laws. As a rule, the laws of *zivah* are more confining, both in the stringency and the duration of the impurity, and the complexity of the purification process.
- On the conceptual level, this means that there are two types of spiritual impurity: natural impurity, which, as explained, is implicit in human life from the time that man tasted of the Tree of Knowledge; and unnatural impurity, which is man's descent into evil by his own initiative, beyond what is inevitable in a world admixed of good and evil (as Adam and Eve did when *all* evil was unnatural).
- One example of this is alluded to by the time periods set by Torah law for these two types of impurity. The impurity of *niddah* applies to seven days of a woman's monthly cycle, while there are eleven days of *zivah*. Chassidic teaching explains that the human soul possesses ten basic attributes: three intellectual faculties-- *chachmah* (perception), *binah* (comprehension), *daat* (application)--and seven emotive traits-- *chesed* (love), *gevurah* (constraint), *tifferet* (synthesis), *netzach* (competitiveness), *hod* (devotion), *yesod* (communicativity) and *malchut* (receptiveness). These ten are the internal attributes of the soul; in addition, the soul also possesses an encompassing or transcendent element, which is the seat of its supra-rational faculties (will, faith, etc.).

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- **Natural and Not**
- The emotions are the most vulnerable to corruption. In the state of affairs that resulted from the first sin of man, the very nature of life dictates that the emotional element in man will be somewhat tainted upon contact with the material world. Feelings are inherently subjective, and it is all but inevitable that they will be influenced by a person's environment and his experiences.
- The intellect, however, is more immune to these influences. G-d has equipped the human mind with the capacity to transcend the personal and the temporal, to rise above its own interests and inclinations in its quest for the absolute and the true. Thus, corruption of the mind cannot be attributed to the natural evil in the human condition, which affects only the seven emotions, represented by the seven days of *niddah*.
- But man has been granted the freedom to choose between good and evil. He can choose to resist the negative influences of his environment, or he can choose to welcome them and submit to them. He can also choose to corrupt himself beyond what is inevitable, or even natural, in his contact with a world of good and evil. He can extend the subjectivity of emotion to the naturally objective mind, reducing his intellect to a lackey of his sentiments and a justifier of his desires. He can even pervert his supra-rational self (whose natural expression is faith in G-d and altruistic service of him) by pursuing an evil path contrary to all reason--contrary, even, to his own self interest.
- Thus, there are eleven days of *zivah*, corresponding to the *unnatural*/evil that man can introduce to all ten of his internal faculties and even to the eleventh faculty of his transcendent self.

- **Refining Torah**
- The intimacy with evil that resulted from the first sin of man became the natural state of affairs on all levels of existence. For man is the epicenter of G-d's creation, and his deeds affect all strata of reality. When man chose to deal with evil by intimate engagement rather than superior distance, he imposed this *modus operandi* upon every entity, terrestrial or celestial, that has a role in the refinement of creation.
- Even the Torah, the divine wisdom and will and G-d's blueprint for creation, was affected when man tasted of the Tree of Knowledge. The Torah, too, was compelled to relate to the world in the manner dictated by man's knowledge of evil, and its intrinsic clarity was blurred by its contact with the worldly and the mundane.
- Thus we open a page of Talmud and encounter contradictory opinions, refuted arguments, obscure passages and unresolved questions. We know that it is all the words of the living G-d. But where is the decisiveness, the unequivocality, the luminous self-evidence that is the hallmark of truth, especially the divine truth? Obscured by the opacity of its subject matter, which is the brute, pedestrian, material world. In the Talmud's own words: "'He has set me in darkness' (Lamentations 3:6)--this is the Babylonian Talmud."

- **Refining Torah**
- But there is one area of Torah where the darkness and obscurity fall away: *halachah*. *Halachah* is the discipline by which concise divine law is distilled from the tortuous byways of *pilpul* and debate, proof and refutation, question, answer and question upon answer that characterize much of Torah. In other words, *halachah* is to Torah what Torah is to the world--the tool of its refinement, the sieve that winnows the chaff from the wheat.
- The Talmud's concluding tractate is the tractate of *Niddah*, whose seventy-three folios discuss the laws of *niddah* and *zivah* impurity. But *niddah* is also a metaphor for the state of reality that has held sway ever since the first man and woman tasted of the Tree of Knowledge. Thus, the tractate of *Niddah* concludes with the following teaching by Elijah the Prophet, herald of the Redemption: "Whoever studies *halachot* every day is guaranteed to be a citizen of the World To Come"--the World To Come being the restoration of the pristine Eden from which man was expelled on the first day of history.