**S.A.L.T. PARASHAT BEREISHIT**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

Rashi, commenting to Parashat Bereishit (1:11), cites the famous remark by the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 5:9) that the ground “sinned” on the third day of creation, by failing to produce the precise kind of trees that God had commanded. God pronounced that the ground should bring forth “*eitz peri*” (“fruit trees”), which the Midrash understands as referring to trees that were entirely flavorful – even their bark. The ground disobeyed God, the Midrash relates, and gave forth “*eitz oseh peri*” – trees that produced fruit, but were otherwise inedible. The Midrash explains that for this reason, when God placed a curse upon humankind in response to Adam and Chava’s sin, He also cursed the ground to punish it for its disobedience (“*Arura ha-adama*” – 3:17).

Rav Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Apta, in his *Oheiv Yisrael*, quipped that the ground disobeyed God with sincere intentions – in order to help human beings for all time repent from their wrongdoing. The ground intentionally committed a sin so that the human being, which is created from the ground (“*afar min ha-adama*” – 2:7), will attribute his sins to the sinful ground from which he was made. This will prevent sinners from falling into despair and encourage them to repent and correct their conduct.

We can perhaps appreciate the message underlying this classic chassidic teaching by considering two other “mishaps” that occurred over the course of creation, as taught by various passages in the Midrash and cited by Rashi. First, God had initially created

an especially powerful light for the world, but then saw that there would be wicked individuals who would be unworthy of benefiting from this special light, and so He concealed it (Rashi to 1:4). On the fourth day of creation, God created the sun and moon equal in size, but was then compelled to diminish the moon’s size due to its complaints, and then create the stars to shine alongside the moon (Rashi to 1:16, based on Chulin 60b). On these three occasions, God’s ideal plan for the world did not materialize.

The idea being conveyed, perhaps, is that as wondrous as this world is, it was created imperfect. Already at the time of creation, the world was flawed. Even before Adam and Chava were driven from *Gan Eden*, the universe was less than ideal.

The Apter Rebbe encourages us by reminding us that we were created to live in an imperfect world, and so we cannot allow our own imperfections to cause us despair. Our job is to do the best we can under the flawed conditions with which we born and with which we live throughout our lives. Of course, the inherently imperfect state of the world does not absolve us from the obligation to constantly work and struggle to improve ourselves and the world. It does, however, require us to place our failings, as well as those of others, into perspective, to recognize that the “ground” from which we were made is flawed, that we were created as complex, imperfect beings and placed in a complex, imperfect world. This recognition should not stifle us, but to the contrary, should encourage and motivate us to continue working and striving despite our mistakes and failures, without ever feeling discouraged and without ever despairing.

Sunday

Yesterday, we noted the famous teaching of the Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 5:9), cited by Rashi in his commentary to Parashat Bereishit (1:11), that the ground “disobeyed” God at the time of the world’s creation. God had commanded the ground to give forth trees that would have flavor even in their bark, but the ground instead grew trees that produced tasty fruit but were otherwise inedible. The Midrash explains on this basis God’s response to Adam and Chava’s sin, after they partook of the forbidden tree in *Gan Eden*, pronouncing, “*Arura ha-adama*” (3:17), placing a curse on the ground, declaring that it would produce food only with great difficulty. This curse, the Midrash comments, came as a delayed punishment for the “sin” it committed at the time of creation.

A number of writers addressed the question of why God did not curse the ground immediately, and instead waited until after Adam and Chava disobeyed God by partaking of the forbidden fruit. The *Yefei Toar* commentary to *Midrash Rabba* suggested that God withheld punishment because punishing the ground would cause human beings undeserved hardship and difficulty. After Adam and Chava’s sin, however, they deserved to be punished, and so at that point God placed a curse on the ground that a great deal of labor and struggle would be needed for it to produce food.

We might also suggest a different approach, viewing the story of the ground’s “disobedience” as intended to analogize imprecise, careless, or partial fulfillment of one’s duties. The Midrash perhaps associated the “curse” pronounced upon the ground and the curse pronounced upon humankind in order to draw our attention to the contrast between these two sins. Adam and Chava committed an act of direct, flagrant disobedience, doing exactly what they were told not to do. The Midrash may have told the story of the ground to depict a subtler form of disobedience – obeying a command in a halfhearted, casual and irresponsible manner. The ground, as depicted by the Midrash, did what it was told to do – but it did not care to follow the instructions precisely. Its work was “shoddy,” performed without attention to detail, resulting in a final product that fell far short of what was intended. By linking the curse pronounced upon the ground and the punishment of Adam and Chava, the Midrash perhaps seeks to teach that we must view shoddy, incomplete performance as severely as we do flagrant violations. Just as we ensure to avoid committing outright forbidden acts, so must we strive to ensure that we fulfill our religious obligations thoroughly, correctly, and in a detailed fashion, so that the *mitzva* acts we produce are as complete as possible.

Monday

The beginning of Parashat Bereishit tells of God’s creation of light, before which all of existence was in a state of darkness and “*tohu va-vohu*” (“chaos” – 1:2). The Midrash, in a perplexing passage (*Bereishit Rabba* 2:5), interprets this description as an allegorical reference to God’s foreseeing the contrast between the righteous conduct of the pious people who would live in the world He now created, and the sinfulness of the wicked. The “darkness,” the Midrash writes, represents the evil deeds of the sinners, whereas the “light” symbolizes the noble deeds of the righteous. The Midrash then comments, startlingly, “But I do not know which He desires – the actions of these, or the actions of these.” The Torah therefore tells us, “God saw that the light was good” (1:4), to teach that “He desires the actions of the righteous and does not desire the actions of the wicked.”

Many writers wondered why the Midrash entertained the possibility that God “desires the actions of the wicked.” Was there any question that God prefers the noble deeds of the righteous over the sinister deeds of the wicked? Why did the Midrash need to find an allusion to the answer to this question in the form of, “God saw that the light was good”?

A novel interpretation of the Midrash’s comment was suggested by Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, in *Kedushat Levi*. He boldly proposed that when the Midrash speaks of “the actions of the wicked,” it does not refer to the sinful conduct of evildoers. Rather, it refers to resorting to anger and sharp criticism – which are normally associated with “evil” conduct – as the means of eliciting positive change. According to Rav Levi Yitzchak, the Midrash here sees “darkness” as an allusion to the use of generally “dark” measures – hostility and rage – out of a sincere desire to motivate people to improve. And thus the Midrash asks, “Which does He desire more?” – whether God prefers the approach of “*ma’aseihem shel tzadikim*,” the approach of kindness, compassion and affection in trying to inspire change in others, or “*ma’aseihem shel resha’im*” – the approach of harsh condemnation. Rav Levi Yitzchak writes:

They [the rabbis in the Midrash] said that…He desires more the “actions of the righteous,” that they should draw the entire world to serve the Creator through words of pleasantness and bring their hearts back to His service without anger…because the path and attribute of God, may He be blessed, is goodness, and He wishes for everyone to draw near to him through goodness, as the verse states, “Its ways are ways of pleasantness” (Mishlei 3:17).

The possibility of achieving positive results through sharp criticism led the Midrash to consider whether perhaps that might be the preferred method of influencing and motivating people to draw closer to God. It concludes unequivocally that the method God approves of is “actions of the righteous” – the method of warmth and kindness.

Rav Levi Yitzchak here warns that even when we are driven by sincere and noble intentions, and even when we produce a desirable and significant outcome, there is no justification for “the actions of the wicked” – anger and animosity. The famous verse in Mishlei, as Rav Levi Yitzchak cites, says of Torah that “its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace” – emphasizing that even the roads leading to Torah knowledge and performance must be pleasant and peaceful. We must always adhere to the “actions of the righteous” and never allow altruistic goals to lead us to inappropriate conduct or attitudes towards other people.

Tuesday

The Torah in Parashat Bereishit tells the famous story of Kayin and Hevel, who both brought offerings to God. After Kayin offered some of his harvested produce, Hevel offered sheep as a sacrifice, and God accepted Hevel’s offerings and not Kayin’s. The Torah relates that Kayin was angered and distraught by the rejection of his offering, and God spoke to him and asked, “Why are you angered? And why has your face fallen?” (4:6). He then assured Kayin that one who acts properly is rewarded, and one who does not will be held accountable for his sins (4:7). Kayin disregarded God’s admonition, and proceeded to kill his brother.

Seforno, commenting on God’s question as to why Kayin felt distraught, explains, “When a blunder has some way of being rectified, it is improper to feel distressed over the past; it is proper instead to try to achieve the rectification for the future.” Kayin erred in allowing the rejection of his offering to cause him anguish, instead if motivating him to try to improve in the future. Along these same lines, Seforno explains God’s subsequent admonition to Kayin as explaining to him that he has the ability to correct himself and improve. The rejection of Kayin’s sacrifice, Seforno writes (4:5), resulted from Kayin’s unworthy character as well as the inferior quality of his offering, and God assured Kayin that his failure in the past did not mean that he would fail in the future. Kayin dwelled on his failure, and this led him to anguish and distress – and, ultimately, to violent rage. God urged Kayin to focus not on the past, but on the present and future; to replace the painful thoughts of what happened with thoughts of how he can improve moving forward. Sadly, Kayin disregarded God’s exhortation, and allowed the negative thoughts and feelings to fester until he violently murdered his brother.

According to Seforno, the tragic story of Kayin and Hevel is about the harm caused by excessive focus on the mistakes of the past instead of looking forward to the future. Dwelling on failure causes pain and anger. Failure should serve not as a source of anguish, but rather as a catalyst for positive change, and when perceived this way, it can lead to joy and satisfaction, instead of negativity and despair.

Wednesday

The Midrash, in a famous passage (*Bereishit Rabba* 8:5), tells that the ministering angels in the heavens formed different “factions” when they heard of God’s intention to create the human being. One of the “battles” that took place, the Midrash relates, was waged between the angels representing Kindness, and the angels representing Truth. The angels of Kindness argued vehemently in favor of the creation of Adam, noting that human beings dispense kindness to one another. The angels of Truth, however, retorted, “He should not be created – for he is full of falsehoods!” The Midrash tells that God “took Truth and cast it onto the ground,” effectively silencing its arguments. He then proceeded to create Adam and Chava.

The Midrash here teaches that kindness and truth are, to an extent, in conflict with one another. People perform many “kindnesses,” but very often, this kindness is “false,” and not genuine. So much of the goodwill we dispense is at least partially insincere, performed for some ulterior motive. Sometimes we do favors begrudgingly, feeling dutybound to help the other person, seeking simply to discharge our responsibility. On some occasions, we do a favor with the expectation of some sort of reciprocity, feeling that helping another person will ultimately come back to benefit us. Another common motive for kindness is social acceptance and approval – we do not wish to appear stingy or uncaring, or we want to build for ourselves an impressive reputation to earn people’s admiration. Additionally, there are times when we act graciously to avoid feelings of guilt. And very often, we do a favor to feel gratified and proud, so we can experience the thrill of being virtuous. We might also dispense kindness in order to satisfy our inner desire to feel important and needed. The common denominator between all these motives is that the favor is done mainly to benefit oneself, rather than the one he or she helps. And so when the “angels of Kindness” argued that the human being should be created because of the kindness people perform, the “angels of Truth” dismissed this claim, noting that the favors are “false,” performed without the sincere desire to assist the beneficiary.

God intervened, and He “took Truth and cast it onto the ground.” This might mean that God affirmed the value of kindness even if it is partially “false,” marred by a tinge of egotism and self-interest. When kindness and truth conflict, precedence is given to kindness. Even if our courtesy, graciousness and generosity is not pristinely sincere, it is meaningful and valuable. While ideally we should strive to be motivated by genuine goodwill and love for our fellow, it is understood that we will often act graciously for self-serving purposes, such as for our reputation, our feelings of pride, or the hope of reciprocation. From the outset, it was anticipated that Truth would at times need to be “cast onto the ground” in the interest of positive and mutually beneficial relationships between people. Even as we strive to achieve purely genuine love for all people, we are urged to act kindly, sensitively, courteously and respectfully even when we are driven by self-serving interests.

Thursday

The Torah in Parashat Bereishit tells the famous story of Adam and Chava’s partaking of the forbidden fruit in *Gan Eden*. We read that the snake approached Chava and falsely claimed that God forbade them from eating the fruit of the forbidden tree because “God knows that on the day you eat from it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (3:5).

Rashi explains this verse to mean that eating the forbidden fruit would – according to the snake’s false claim – invest Adam and Chava with creative powers, the ability to create universes just as God had. The snake alleged that God was afraid of Adam and Chava becoming creators capable of competing with Him, and for this reason He warned them to abstain from the tree. It is unclear according to Rashi’s interpretation how the phrase “*yod’ei tov va-ra*” (“knowers of good and evil”) should be understood, as it does not appear relevant to the snake’s claim.

Others – including Rav Saadia Gaon, Ibn Ezra, the Radak and Chizkuni – explain the word “*elohim*” in the snake’s remark to mean “angels.” According to this interpretation, the snake claimed that partaking of the forbidden fruit would endow Adam and Chava with the wisdom and knowledge of angels, and this is what tempted Chava to partake of the fruit. The snake sought to convince Chava that God wanted to ensure that Adam and Chava would remain inferior to the heavenly beings, and this is the only reason why He warned them not to eat the tree’s fruit.

An entirely different explanation is offered by Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (to 2:2-3), who suggests that to the contrary, that snake lured Chava by persuading her to become animal-like. Rav Hirsch writes that animals are “like God, knowing good and evil” in the sense that they, in Rav Hirsch’s words, “have innate instinct, and this instinct is the Voice of God, the Will of God for them.” Lacking the intelligence to make willed, moral decisions, to distinguish between good and evil, animals always do precisely what God wants them to do. Everything they do is determined by Divine Providence, and therefore is, by definition, good, whereas everything they refrain from doing by force of their God-given instincts is, necessarily, bad. The human being, by contrast, does not have this kind of Godly instinct, whereby he unconsciously lives according to the divine will. We humans need to use our intelligence and muster the powers of self-restraint and submission in order to follow the divine will. Rav Hirsch writes:

Animals do no wrong, they have only their one nature that they are to follow. Not so Man. He is to decide for the good and eschew evil from his own free choice, and from the consciousness of his duty… Sensual enjoyment for him is to be a moral free-willed act, he is never, and in to ways whatsoever, to be an animal. For that purpose he has both, sensuality and godliness, within him, that which is good and right must often oppose his sensuality, bad and evil must often appear attractive and tempting to him, so that for the sake of his high godly calling he practices the good and eschews the evil with the free-willed energy of his godly nature… That is why the Voice of God does not speak in him, but to him, to say what is good and what is bad…

The purpose of the forbidden tree, Rav Hirsch proceeds to explain, was to convey this precise message – to serve as a model of something tempting and alluring which the Voice of God has designated as “bad.” Adam and Chava’s innate nature told them it was “good,” but God had told them otherwise. Rav Hirsch writes that the tree “was to be…the model, the pattern and the rule for all good and bad for mankind,” showing us that our senses’ designation of “good” and “bad” do not necessarily correlate to God’s designation of “good” and “bad.”

The snake lured Chava by inviting her to be like an animal, by submitting to her instincts and senses, insisting that they are the “Voice of God” just as they are within all other creatures in the animal kingdom. The lure of the forbidden tree was the opportunity to live like animals, freed from the need to make conscious, rational decisions rather than follow sensual instincts. The snake was, in fact, correct – God indeed prohibited eating from this tree in order to prevent Adam and Chava from living like animals, following their instincts. Unfortunately, Chava succumbed to the temptation to be freed from the constraints of conscience, to allow her instincts to dictate her conduct rather than exercise control over her instincts in submission to the divine will. Her failure marked the failure to accept the disparity between our senses and our conscience, between our instinctive “voice” and God’s “voice.” And this failure teaches us that what we intuitively and naturally sense as “good” is not necessarily “good,” and that we must study and listen attentively to the “Voice of God” as expressed by the Torah so we can always accurately distinguish between “good”’ and “evil.”

Friday

Yesterday, we noted the snake’s claim to Chava that God warned against eating the fruit of the forbidden tree because “God knows that on the day you eat from it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (3:5). As we saw, different interpretations have been given for the notion that eating from the tree would cause Adam and Chava to “be like God, knowing good and evil.”

A classic chassidic reading of this verse appears in Rav Kalonymus Kalman Epstein’s *Ma’or Va-shemesh*, where he explains that the snake refers here to the lure of judgmentalism. In its attempt to persuade Chava to partake of the forbidden fruit, the snake alleged that eating the fruit would empower her to judge people like God does, to know the “good and evil” of other people. Humans are limited in their knowledge and understanding, and are thus incapable of rendering definitive judgment about the people around them. Even when we witness people’s conduct, we are missing key pieces of information, and, additionally, we are not privy to the innumerable psychological factors that contributed to the individual’s decision to commit a given action. The snake understood the innate human desire to judge, to determine other people’s innocence or guilt, and so it tried persuading Chava that the forbidden fruit would free her from her human limitations and enable her to be like God, definitively determining other people’s moral and spiritual standing.

The *Ma’or Va-shemesh* here essentially compares the lure of forbidden physical pleasure to the lure of what we might call forbidden emotional pleasure – the enjoyment of pride that results from arrogantly judging other people’s conduct. Like tempting “forbidden fruit,” the seeming faults, mistakes and indiscretions of other people attract us, enticing us to indulge in the thrill of condescension. Just as we are given opportunities for permissible pleasures to satisfy our physical needs and desires, while being required to refrain from certain forbidden physical pleasures, we are likewise given permissible ways to experience emotional fulfillment, while being barred from forbidden forms. We are allowed, and encouraged, to achieve fulfillment through close interpersonal relationships, and by working to achieve, accomplish and succeed in the endeavors we choose to pursue, which brings us a genuine sense of self-worth. Emotional fulfillment through arrogance and snobbery is the “forbidden fruit” of emotion, a tempting means of enjoyment which is strictly off-limits. In our quest for feelings of self-esteem and self-worth, we are to work to become people worthy of our own esteem and admiration, instead of looking critically and condescendingly at the people around us for the purpose of feeling superior and proud.

**THE FIRST DECADE OF SALT ARCHIVES CAN BE FOUND AT:**

[www.etzion.org.il/en/salt-archives.html](http://etzion.org.il/en/salt-surf-little-torah-archives)

**MORE RECENT INSTALLMENTS OF SALT DIVREI TORAH CAN BE FOUND AT:**

[www.etzion.org.il/en/topics/salt-surf-little-torah-weekly-files](http://www.etzion.org.il/en/topics/salt-surf-little-torah-weekly-files)