**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**A River Flows from Eden:**

**The Garden of Eden**

**as the Inner Source of the Jewish Holidays**

**Rav Uriel Eitam**

**Shiur #20:**

**Above the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil**

**Part 1**

**The Root of the Book of Esther**

**and the Holiday of Purim**

**in the Garden of Eden**

Where is Haman alluded to in the Torah? In the verse (*Bereishit* 3:11): "Is it from (*Ha-min*) the tree (*ha-etz*)?" (*Chullin* 139b)

I heard about this from my teacher and grandfather’s holy mouth: to rise up above the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. However, I do not clearly remember what he said. Still, it seems… (*Sefat Emet, Purim* 5640)

"Where is Haman indicated in the Torah? In the verse: *'Ha-min ha-etz?*'" *Chazal* send us from the Book of *Esther* to “the tree,” the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil: "Is it from the tree, of which I commanded that you should not eat, that you have eaten"?

What is the connection between Haman and the word *ha-min*? Are we dealing merely with a meaningless confluence of letters?

*Chazal* use this short and obscure statement to teach us a secret hidden away in the Book of *Esther.* A review of the expressions of good and evil found in the book reveals a surprising phenomenon, which is a sort of riddle. An examination of the book, with the good and the evil contained within it, against the backdrop of the story of the Garden of Eden and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, reveals what is hidden in the book, shedding new light on it, and illuminates the holiday of Purim.

I

THE TREE OF LIFE AND

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD AND EVIL

**The Tree of Life and the Tree of Death**

Two special trees are found in the Garden of Eden: the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Let us consider the meaning of these two trees, which occupy such a central place in the story of the Garden of Eden.

At first glance, these trees seem to reflect two different essences which are not directly related to each other, namely "life" and "the knowledge of good and evil." Upon further examination, however, we see that a contrasting relationship exists between them. Eating from the Tree of Life grants the eaters life, eternal life, as is explicitly stated at the end of the story: "And now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and live forever" (*Bereishit* 3:23). In contrast, eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil leads to the death of whoever eats from it: "But of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat of it; for in the day that you eat thereof you shall surely die" (*Bereishit* 2:17). Additionally, Adam is told after his sin: "For dust you are, and to dust shall you return" (*Bereishit* 3:19). If so, it may be argued that the Tree of Life is exactly what its name indicates, the source of immortality, whereas the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is essentially the opposite of the Tree of Life — i.e. the Tree of Death. This, in fact, is what the tree is called in *Tikkunei Ha-Zohar*: *ilana de-muta* (24, 69a).[[1]](#footnote-1)

**The Tree of Good and the Tree of Good and Evil**

Having considered the contrast between the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil as a contrast between life and death, we can consider another dimension of the relationship between the essences of the two trees. This dimension emerges from the Torah's words at the end of Moshe's oration concerning the *mitzvot* in the book of *Devarim* (30:15-20):

See, I have set before you this day life and good, and death and evil… But if your heart turn away, and you will not hear… you shall surely perish; you shall not prolong your days upon the land, where you pass over the Jordan to go in to possess it. I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore choose life, that you may live, you and your seed; to love the Lord your God, to hearken to His voice, and to cleave to Him; for that is your life, and the length of your days; that you may dwell in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers…

The basic concepts mentioned in these verses are found already in the story of the Garden of Eden, in the story of Adam and Chava and their sin: good and evil, life and death, blessing and curse, obedience and disobedience, living on chosen ground and being exiled from it. From these verses, we learn about the essential relationship between life and good, and by contrast, between death and evil. In light of these identifications and against the backdrop of the classification of the two trees in the Garden of Eden as the Tree of Life and the Tree of Death, we may say that the Tree of Life reflects completely belonging to good, while the main novelty of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, the Tree of Death, is man's connection to evil as well. The knowledge of good and evil cancels humanity’s full connection to the good, bringing it down into a world that contains evil as well.[[2]](#footnote-2)

It should be noted that just as the contrast to absolute life in the Garden of Eden would be life that has death (not immediate-absolute death), so too the contrast to the full good of the Tree of Life would be good that is mixed with evil (not absolute evil). Only after the sin does humanity descend into the lower world, the world containing good and evil, a world in which it stands before the tension between good and evil themselves. Before the sin, man faces a higher choice — not between good and evil, but between life and good-and-evil — between a full life of absolute good and a limited life of a mixture of good and evil. The verses at the end of Moshe's oration concerning the *mitzvot* relate to our world, the world after the sin, and therefore the concepts appearing in them, as contrasting with life and good, are not the concepts of a mixture of good and evil and life that has death, but rather expressions of absolute death and evil.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The connection between life, eternal life, and absolute good is also reflected in the words of *Chazal* concerning the World to Come, where the original objective assigned to man — eternal life in a state of communion with God — will be realized. The World to Come is characterized by *Chazal* as a reality in which there is no evil, a stage at which all is good:

"In order that it may be well with you" (*Devarim* 5:29) — in a world that is wholly good; “and in order that your days may be long" (ibid.) — in a world that is wholly long. (*Kiddushin* 39b)

At this level of reality, there is no knowledge of evil and there is no place or need for distinguishing between good and evil:

Rabbi Acha bar Chanina said: Not like this world is the World to Come. In this world, for good tidings one says: "He is good, and He does good," while for evil tidings he says: "Blessed be the true Judge;" [whereas] in the future world it shall be only: “He is good and He does good." (*Pesachim* 50a)

The ability to distinguish between good tidings and evil tidings and their respective blessings is necessary in this world. The World to Come is wholly good, and therefore it is wholly "He is good and He does good," and there is no longer a need to distinguish between good and evil.

**The Choice that Precedes the Sin**

The descent in the wake of the sin from the level of knowing good alone to the level of knowing good and evil is a profound change in man's situation. Before the sin, Adam and Chava themselves do not know good and evil. They are created with evil being a force located outside of them and not within them, and therefore the seduction began with the serpent, a creature found outside of the human race.

At this stage, humanity has not yet had inner contact with evil, and it still lacks the ability to distinguish between good and evil, an ability that is derived from an inner connection to them. Before the sin, Adam and Chava lack the two characteristics that are included in the concept of "knowledge of good and evil": knowledge as connection, and knowledge as the ability to distinguish. Indeed, the ability to distinguish between good and evil is unnecessary for a person who has no inner connection to evil. Man's fundamental state is connection to good, cleaving to God, from which doing good should emerge on its own.

When Adam and Chava eat from the tree, the "lust of the serpent" enters humanity itself, and evil became an inner part of its world. From now on, as humanity knows evil as well, it also becomes endowed with the knowledge to distinguish between good and evil.[[4]](#footnote-4)

It is clear, however, that even before the sin, man can choose between various possible states, as he is commanded and he sins. However, the choice before which man stands prior to the sin of Adam and Chava is different from that which our world faces today in the wake of the sin. As stated, man's fundamental state before the sin is cleaving to the good, with no inner evil inside of him. However, this state is given to man through his very creation without his ever having chosen it, and this defines the choice that lies before him: man can choose this state and thereby make it eternal; or else, he can go in the opposite direction, give up his being connected only to the good and become one who knows good and evil. This is the test of man's free choice prior to the sin.

This choice finds expression in God's command to Adam in the Garden of Eden:

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying: Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat of it. (*Bereishit* 2:16-17)

Only after Adam and Chava sin by eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is the prohibition formulated to eat of the Tree of Life. At first, however, the Tree of Life is included in "every tree of the garden" of which Adam and Chava may freely eat, and only the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is forbidden to them:

Therefore it is stated: "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat" — this is the Tree of Life of which Adam was to eat. He sinned only with the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, regarding which he was commanded not to eat. (*Zohar Chadash* I, 31b)[[5]](#footnote-5)

Humanity is created with the capacity to choose between eating from the Tree of Life, whereby it may eternalize its detachment from evil and its cleaving to the good and to God, and eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, whereby external evil would become internal, after which humanity will know both good and evil, and it will be subjected to the inner struggle between them. Choosing the "Tree of Life" constitutes fidelity to both the Divine imperative and man’s inner being — the spirit of life breathed into Adam by God (*Bereishit* 2:7).

By contrast, replacing eating of the Tree of Life with eating of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil constitutes rebellion against God, and at the same time a denial of man’s inner self, the spirit of life within humanity, out of subjugation to the serpent's seduction.

**“To Keep the Way to the Tree of Life”**

Ever since the fall of humanity, the forces of good and evil struggle within it. In such a situation, a blurring of good and evil and the inability to clearly distinguish between them is liable to be devastating for man. Not knowing evil, which is a great virtue of humanity at its original level, when evil is outside of it, constitutes a great obstacle after the sin, when evil is inside it. Humanity's original state, when it knows only good, turns now into a great danger for man, for the idea of "everything is good," in a world of tremendous confrontation between good and evil, prevents any war against evil, and allows evil to take control of the world.

Therefore, after man descends into a world of knowing good and evil, the human race is barred from eating of the Tree of Life:

And the Lord God said: Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever…

So He drove out the man; and He placed at the east of the garden of Eden the cherubim, and the flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way to the Tree of Life. (*Bereishit* 3:22-24)

It is precisely "now", after "man is become as one of us, to know good and evil," that man is barred from eating of the Tree of Life. Eating from the Tree of Life in this state is an attempt to belong to a world that is wholly good, in contrast to the level of man who knows good and evil, and this might perpetuate the state of inner evil within man. From now on, in its postlapsarian world, humanity's spiritual task is to distinguish between good and evil, and from that, to choose good and turn away from evil. Totally turning away from evil will eventually lead the world back to a state in which it is wholly good.

The full struggle with the descent in the wake of the sin of Adam and Chava takes place when the Torah is given to Israel, as *Chazal* say:

When the serpent came upon Chava, he injected a lust into her; [as for] the Israelites who stood at Mount Sinai, their lustfulness departed. (*Shabbat* 146a)[[6]](#footnote-6)

The Torah is based on the recognition of the world's decline in the wake of Adam's sin into a mixture of good and evil, and on the recognition that the return to a world that is wholly good can only occur by way of the knowledge that distinguishes between good and evil, and only after man will cleave to the good because of that knowledge. The Torah is the knowledge — through its detailed guidelines and commandments, it distinguishes between good and evil, between the permitted and the forbidden, between the impure and the pure, between the fit and the unfit.

From a broader perspective, we can say that there are two aspects of the Torah, corresponding to the two levels of the world — a prelapsarian Torah and a postlapsarian Torah; Torah that directs man to eat from the Tree of Life, and Torah that repairs man's eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Adam's Torah, which commanded him to eat of the Tree of Life and not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, belongs to an ideal world, and is directed toward man's highest goal — immortality in a world that is wholly good. The Torah given to Israel teaches man how to go from a world of good and evil to a world that is wholly good, and thus it is a Torah that comes to repair Adam's sin.

**“And He Drank from the Wine, and Became Drunk”**

The significance of the new reality after Adam's sin, with all its challenges and dangers, is evident when Noach emerges from the ark.

The Flood returns the world to its formless void, and it is followed by a kind of re-creation. Noach goes out into this world, and finds himself in a position similar to that of Adam, being the father of the new humanity. After leaving the ark, Noach plants a vineyard, becomes drunk and removes his clothing:

And Noach, the man of the earth, began, and planted a vineyard. And he drank of the wine, and became drunk; and he uncovered himself within his tent. (*Bereishit* 9:20-21)

How are we to understand Noach's actions? His actions appear to be aimed at returning to Adam's level before the sin. This is why he uses wine: drunkenness is meant to eliminate the effect of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, as it liberates man from knowledge.

So too the clothing which Noach removes comes into the world because of the reality created in the wake of the sin. With the removal of his clothing, Noach returns to man's initial state: "And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed" (*Bereishit* 2:25).

However, the shattering of this illusion and the harsh results are not long to come: "And Cham, the father of Kena’an, saw the nakedness of his father" (*Bereishit* 9:22). The evil that is found within man spreads precisely through the elimination of his ability to distinguish between it and the good. The elimination of knowledge does not restore reality to the level that is above knowledge, the state of fully cleaving to the good, but rather it brings it down to the level that is below knowledge, to the eruption of passion, perhaps to the point of incest (*Sanhedrin* 70a).

The struggle with evil takes place only with the restoration of knowledge, after the influence of the wine has waned:

And Noach awoke from his wine, and knew what his youngest son had done to him. And he said: Cursed be Kena’an; a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers. And he said: Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem. (*Bereishit* 9:24-26)

Once Noach's knowledge is restored, he can distinguish between good and evil, and this brings him to the proper attitude and appropriate response, a curse and a blessing.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil brings death upon man. The transition from eternal life to transitory life with a certain end is in itself a form of death. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The connection between the end of Moshe's oration concerning the *mitzvot* and the story of the Garden of Eden is mentioned already by early authorities. Rav David ben Shemuel Estella, a Provencal Rishon, in his *Sefer Ha-batim (Sefer Emuna*, p. 90), discusses the end of the oration concerning the *mitzvot* in his explanation of the story of the Garden of Eden. The connection is mentioned primarily by Kabbalists. For example, see: Rav Yosef Gikatilla, *Sha'arei Ora*, Sec. 1 and 8; Chida, *Lev David*, Ch. 1 (copied from a manuscript of Rav Chayim Vital). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The understanding that the essence of the Tree of Life is absolute good with no intermingling of evil whatsoever, from which it also follows that before the sin, man belongs on this level, emerges from the writings of Rav Kook: "He must not eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, because only the Tree of Life, which is wholly good, is prepared for him" (*Orot Ha-kodesh*, II, p. 453; see also p. 298, and p. 500). This idea is rooted in the words of Rav Moshe Cordovero (*Pardes Rimonim*, Sec. 23, Ch. 8, s.v. *Chayei ha-melekh*).

Know that wherever there is life, there is no evil, neither a little, nor a lot. For that which is called life is the essence of all the good things and all the delights and all the future rewards of the righteous and the pious; but a place called death is the opposite of life. Therefore the Torah states: “See, I have set before you this day life and good, and death and evil” (*Devarim* 30:15). With life comes good, and with death comes evil.

The good of the level of the Tree of Life is of an entirely differently quality than the good of the world in which good and evil intermingle. The difference expresses itself not only in the fact that the evil part is missing; it is not quantitative and relational, but rather essential and absolute. In light of the words of Rav Cordovero, it seems that this is the reason that the Tree of Life — which, as we have seen, expresses not only eternity but also perfect good — is not called by the Torah "the tree of good," as expressing one side of the good-evil dichotomy, but rather "the Tree of Life" — the tree that belongs to the level of "life," which is "the essence of all the good things." [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In the spirit of these words, Rav Chayim of Volozhin explains Adam's sin in his book, *Nefesh Ha-chayim (*I, 6, second note).

The idea is that before the sin, he certainly had the absolute choice to turn himself toward whatever he wanted, to do good, or the opposite, God forbid. For this was the ultimate purpose of all of creation, and also because afterward he sinned. However, his ability to choose was not because the forces of evil were found within him, for he was an altogether righteous person, comprised only of the forces of sanctity, and everything about him was righteous and holy and refined, absolute good with no mixture of or inclination toward the opposite whatsoever, and the forces of evil stood to the side, a separate entity outside of him. However, he had the choice to enter into the forces of evil just as a person has the choice to enter into a fire.

Therefore when the Other Side [*Sitra Achra*] wanted to bring him to sin, the serpent had to come from the outside to seduce man. This is not the situation now, when the evil impulse that seduces a person is within each person and it seems to the person that it is he himself who wants and is drawn to commit the sin, and not that something else outside of him is seducing him.

When Adam sinned and was drawn after the seduction of the Other Side, then the forces of evil became intermingled within him, and in the worlds. This is the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, through which good and evil became joined and mixed within him and in the worlds, the one actually in the other. Knowledge means connection, as is well-known. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. So it is also stated in *Midrash Tanchuma*: "The Holy One, blessed be He, said: I placed you in the Garden of Eden, so that you should toil in the Torah, and eat of the Tree of Life" (*Tanchuma*, Buber, *Parashat Bereishit* 25). See also *Sha'arei Ora* (5):

God did not warn Adam not to eat of the Tree of Life, and did not bar him from doing so. O that he should eat! Rather, He barred him from eating of the Tree of Knowledge… But after Adam sinned… He did not allow him to draw close to the Tree of Life. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See *Bereishit* 3:22, in the original text and in the rendering of the *Targum Yerushalmi,* respecitvely:

And the Lord God said: Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the Tree of Life, and eat, and live forever.

Behold, the man whom I created alone in My world, just as I am alone in the high heavens; great nations will one day arise from him; from him will arise a nation that knows how to distinguish between good and evil.

 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)