

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

PARSHAS BEREISHIS

The Sin of the Etz Hadaas

כִּי יֵדַע אֱלֹהִים כִּי בַיּוֹם אֲכָלְכֶם מִמֶּנּוּ וְנִפְקַחוּ עֵינֵיכֶם וְהִיִּיתֶם כְּאֱלֹהִים יֹדְעֵי טוֹב וְרָע

For God knows that on the day you eat from it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowers of good and evil. (Bereishis 3:5)

Many commentators over the generations have struggled with the question of how the snake was able to convince Chava to do something which Hashem had expressly forbidden – on pain of death, no less. Likewise, for her part, how could Chava allow herself to be convinced?

The Snake's Argument

The approach of the Meshech Chochmah to this question is truly astounding. He explains that the snake was not trying to convince Chava that she would not die if she ate from the tree, contrary to what Hashem had said. Rather, he was arguing that if she and Adam truly valued closeness to Hashem, then they should be prepared to do anything that would bring that closeness about, even if it meant that they would die! Since eating from the tree would make them more Godlike in the sense of knowing good and evil, they should be prepared to do it even if it required them give up their lives. What's more, argued the snake, the idea that you would be prepared to offer your lives in defiance of Hashem's command in order to attain closeness to Him is actually what He really wants you to do – that is the Divine will!

In this light, the Meshech Chochmah explains that the snake's words to Chava at the end of pasuk 4, "לא מות תמתין," are not to be translated as "you shall not surely die," i.e. with the snake disputing what Chava had been told in Hashem's name. Rather, they are to be translated as "No, you should indeed die!" In this way, the snake was seeking to convince Chava to perform what is known as "*aveirah Lishmah* – a sin for the sake of Heaven." And indeed, Chava, and in turn Adam, were taken in by this appeal to their lofty desire to attain the maximum level of closeness to Hashem possible – whatever the cost.

The Reality

However, almost immediately upon eating from the tree, it became abundantly and painfully clear that it had not brought them any further degree of closeness to Hashem at all, and in fact, had only served to distance them greatly. The first consequence of their sin was their consciousness of their nakedness as a source of shame for them. Prior to the sin, man's physical make-up was of an elevated nature, attuned toward goodness, so that no element of his anatomy was any reason for shame. After the sin, his physicality assumed a coarser nature, and his nakedness was now cause for shame and had to be covered up.

The second indicator of the distance that had been engendered by their eating from the tree is mentioned *pasuk* 8, which states that they heard the sound of Hashem walking in the garden, whereupon they hid themselves among the trees. The point of the *pasuk* is not that they heard the sound of Hashem coming and tried to hide themselves in order to avoid detection. Rather, prior to the sin, man's encounter with Hashem had taken the form of a Godly vision as well as a Divine message. Having eaten from the *Etz Hadaas*, however, he was no longer able to experience any visions; his communication from Hashem now took the form solely of hearing Him. Therefore, upon (only) hearing Hashem and thereby realizing the extent to which he had fallen through his sin, and the agonizing distance he had created between Hashem and himself, he hid among the trees in shame of having been taken in by the persuasive arguments of the snake.¹

Hence, when Hashem asked Adam the question "where are you?" meaning, "Where has your sin left you?" Adam answered by mentioning the above two points: "I heard Your voice in the Garden," i.e. I only heard a voice but with no accompanying vision, "And I was fearful for I was naked," i.e. I saw that my nakedness had become a cause for shame in my lowered state, and so I hid. For this reason, in His rebuke to Adam, Hashem referred to the tree as "*the tree from which I commanded you not to eat,*"² and not simply as, "the Tree of Knowledge." Through this, Hashem was emphasizing to Adam that His commandment regarding the tree represented His essential will, and that no form of closeness to Hashem could ever come from disobeying His word.

1 See commentary *Aderes Eliyahu* of the Vilna Gaon to *Bereishis* loc. cit. who likewise explains the *pasuk* in this way.

2 *Pasuk* 11.

Avraham: Paving the Way Back

The situation of “hearing from Hashem without seeing” pertained for all the Neviim in the generations that followed.³ The first one to begin to reverse this trend was Avraham. In the beginning of *Parshas Lech Lecha*, Hashem tells Avraham to go to the land of Canaan where He will bestow on him great blessing. After Avraham had arrived at the land, Hashem appears to him and again blesses him, whereupon the *pasuk* says, “וַיִּבֶן שָׁם מִזְבֵּחַ לַיהוָה הַנִּרְאָה” וְאֵלֵינוּ – he [Avraham] built an altar for Hashem Who appeared to him.”⁴ The Meshech Chochmah explains that the words “Who appeared to him” are not merely a reiterative description of Hashem on that occasion – they are the reason for the building of the *mizbeyach*! While still in Charan, Avraham only heard Hashem’s word, but having arrived in Canaan, he rose in spiritual level so as to be able to merit Hashem appearing to him – the first such occurrence since before the sin of the *Etz Hadaas* – and to mark his gratitude he built a *mizbeyach* “to Hashem Who appeared to him.”

3 This final section is based on Meshech Chochmah to *Bereishis* 12:7.

4 *Bereishis* *ibid*.