**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**Midrash on the Parasha**

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Dedicated in memory of Rabbi Jack Sable z”l and

Ambassador Yehuda Avner z”l

By Debbi and David Sable

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**Parashat Bereishit:**

**The Tree of Knowledge**

### Introduction

The author of the *derasha* that we will be dealing with in the context of *Parashat Bereishit* is Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra, one of the earliest Amoraim in Eretz Israel, a contemporary of Rabbi Yochanan, and the teacher of Rabbi Abbahu and Rabbi Elazar ben Pedat. Most of his statements are found in the Midrashic literature of Eretz Israel, all of which relate to matters of aggada. The majority are conceptual statements; a minority are methodological-interpretative rules.

The *derasha* that we will be examining relates to the verse that describes eating from the Tree of Knowledge:

And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight *(ta’ava)* to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise (*ve-nechmad ha-etz le-haskil)*, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he did eat. (*Bereishit* 3:6)

The *derasha* in question appears in *Bereishit Rabba*:

["That the tree was good for food."]

Rabbi Elazar said in the name of Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra:

Three things are said about the tree: It is good for food, it is beautiful to the eyes, and it adds wisdom.

And the three are said in the same verse:

"And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food" — from here that it is good for food.

"And that it was a delight to the eyes" — from here that it is beautiful to the eyes.

"And that the tree was to be desired to make one wise" — from here that it adds wisdom.

This is what is stated: “A *maskil* of Eitan Ha-Ezrachi" (*Tehillim* 89:1). (*Bereishit Rabba* 19, 5, ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 174)

### Linguistic-conceptual explanation

Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra attributes three positive qualities to the tree (“It is good for food, it is beautiful to the eyes, and it adds wisdom”); and he connects each quality to a phrase in the verse. Regarding the first two qualities, the connection is obvious to the *darshan*, and his own words seem to be a paraphrase of the wording of the verse, no additional proof being required. As for the third quality, the interpretation offered is not perceived as being self-evident, and another verse is brought as proof.

### Good for food

Let us go back and examine each clause of the *derasha.* The formulation "from here that it is good for food" in the first clause echoes the wording of the verse: "that the tree was good for food." These words can be understood in three different ways: as indicating that the fruit of the tree is fit for human consumption, as indicating that it is a healthy human food, or as indicating that it has a fine taste.[[1]](#footnote-1)

A comparison with parallel *derashot* throughout the literature of *Chazal* shows that it is understood by other Amoraim of Eretz Israel (the compiler of *Bereishit Rabba*?) in the third way:

Rabbi Lazar said in the name of Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra: Three things are said about the tree: It is good for food, it is beautiful to the eyes, and it adds wisdom…

And similarly Yitzchak said: "And make me savory food" (*Bereishit* 27:4).

He said to him: At first I took pleasure in appearance; now I take pleasure only in taste.

And similarly Shlomo said: "When goods increase, they are increased that eat them; and what advantage is there to the owner thereof, save the beholding of them with his eyes?" (*Kohelet* 5:10).

You cannot compare him who sees an empty bread basket and is hungry, to him who sees it filled and is satisfied.[[2]](#footnote-2) (*Bereishit Rabba* 65, 4, ed. Theodor-Albeck, pp. 724-725)

**Beautiful to the eyes**

The word *ta'ava* in the verse is explained in the second clause of the *derasha* as "*yafeh*," which usually denotes beauty. It seems, therefore, that we should understand the expression "*yafeh* to the eyes" in the context of the verse as relating to the aesthetic realm — "beautiful to the eyes." This also follows from the parallel exposition cited above, which speaks explicitly of pleasure from appearance.

However, this phrase as used by *Chazal* has also another meaning, one that relates to the realm of health, as we find in BT *Berakhot* 51a:

Our Rabbis taught: Asparagus brew is good (*yafeh*)for the heart and good for the eyes, and, needless to say, for the bowels. If one uses it regularly, it is good (*yafeh*) for the whole body.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This meaning is found in *Targum Onkelos* on our verse:

And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a cure for the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to look at.[[4]](#footnote-4)

As stated, in light of the parallel testimony, which also appears in *Bereishit Rabba*, it seems that we should adopt the first explanation. It is possible that Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra's wording in the *derasha* is understood by later scholars (= the compiler of *Bereishit Rabba*) as relating to the aesthetic realm, even though the original *derasha* relates to the health realm.

From what we have said so far, it follows that the first two clauses of the *derasha* certainly relate to the realm of man's eating (the food's fitness for human consumption, its health qualities, its taste), and perhaps also to the aesthetic realm — the appearance of the food.

### Adds wisdom

As for the third clause, the word in the verse, *le-haskil*, is interpreted as referring to wisdom. The connection between *sekhel* and wisdom is well-anchored in *Tanakh*. For example, in *Mishlei,* we find: "When the scorner is punished, the thoughtless is made wise; and when the wise (*chakham*) is instructed (*u-vhaskil*), he receives knowledge" (21:11). The addition of wisdom can be understood as being included in the word *le-haskil*; that is to say, the act of enlightenment is itself an addition of wisdom (as is stated in *Mishlei* 9:9: "Give to a wise man, and he will be yet wiser; teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning”). If this, in fact, is Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra's understanding in the *derasha*, he does not relate at all to the word *nechmad* in the verse.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Another matter that requires explanation in the third clause is the choice of the verse that is brought as proof:

"And that the tree was to be desired to make one wise" — from here that it adds wisdom. This is what is stated: “A *maskil* of Eitan Ha-Ezrachi" (*Tehillim* 89:1).

There are many verses in which the act of enlightenment is clearly and strongly related to the acquisition and addition of wisdom. For example: "Now as for these four youths, God gave them knowledge and skill (*ve-haskel*)in all learning and wisdom (*chokhma*)" (*Daniel* 1:17); "And on the second day were gathered together the heads of fathers' houses of all the people, the priests, and the Levites, unto Ezra the scribe, even to give attention (*le-haskil*) to the words of the Law" (*Daniel* 8:13). It is not at all clear how the verse chosen proves anything about adding wisdom. What is more, one may ask why the *darshan* doesn'tchoose a verse containing the form *le-haskil,* which is close to the form of the word in the verse under discussion, but rather chooses a verse containing the form *maskil*. This is all the more difficult in light of the fact that the meaning of the word *maskil* in this context is exceedingly obscure.

Some of these questions are raised by Rabbi Ya’akov Moshe Ashkenazi in his commentary to *Bereishit Rabba*, *Yedei Moshe*, ad loc. The answer that he offers is based on *Chazal's* tradition that identifies Eitan Ha-Ezrachi with the patriarch Avraham, who symbolizes the highest level of the righteous sage involved in constant spiritual ascent. It is difficult to accept what he says as an explanation of the *derasha*, because it does not explain the *derasha* from within, relying instead on an external idea to which there is not even an allusion in the *derasha.* Nevertheless, it should be noted that the identification of Eitan ha-Ezrachi with Avraham is found in the Midrashic literature of Eretz Israel, and even in the Babylonian Talmud in the name of Rav, and so it is possible that Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra has it in mind.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The idea that Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra relies on another source when he adduces here the verse from *Tehillim* is feasible and generally accepted in the study of the words of the Sages. In my opinion, it is possible to point to a *derasha* of Rabbi Acha in *Vayikra Rabba* as a source for Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra’s exegesis:

Rabbi Acha said: One who learns in order to perform merits the holy spirit.

What is the reason? "This book of the Law shall not depart out of your mouth, but you shall meditate therein day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written therein; for then you shall make your ways prosperous, and then you shall have good success (*taskil*)" (*Yehoshua* 1:8).

And the word *taskil* [in this context] means the holy spirit.

As it is stated: “A *maskil* of Eitan Ha-Ezrachi" (*Tehillim* 89:1). (*Vayikra Rabba* 35, 7, ed. Margaliot, p. 826)

Rabbi Acha connects enlightenment to the concept of the holy spirit, without addressing the identity of Eitan Ha-Ezrachi. It seems that the speaker is Rabbi Acha, the fourth/ fifth-generation Tanna who reports teachings in the name of Rabbi Akiva.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Identifying this tradition as Tannaitic is supported by the *Pesikta Rabbati*:

When he [Yosef] stood Efrayim on his left and Menasheh on his right, what did Ya’akov do? "He wittingly guided (*sikel*)his hands" (*Bereishit* 48:14)*.*

What is *sikel*?

Rabbi said: He guided his hands with certainty.

Rabbi Yehuda said: Ya’akov guided his hands to the birthright of Menasheh.

And Rabbi Nechemya said: Ya’akov guided his hands with the holy spirit.

As it is written: "A *maskil* of Eitan Ha-Ezrachi" (*Tehillim* 89:1). (*Pesikta Rabbati* 3, ed. Ish-Shalom, p. 12)

According to this, it may be argued that Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra incorporates into his *derasha* a Tannaitic tradition that sees the verse "a *maskil* of Eitan Ha-Ezrachi" as a source attesting to the holy spirit, which he directs toward the matter of added wisdom in the context of the Tree of Knowledge.

What we have said here does not answer all of the questions we raised regarding the latter part of Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra's *derasha*. They remain in force and may now be directed at the words of the Tannaim.

Another question that arises from the *derasha* relates to the statement that man adds wisdom in the wake of his eating. The idea that fruit "illuminate the eyes" is brought in the Babylonian Talmud in the name of Rabbi Akiva, who includes fruit trees as a pre-condition for a Torah scholar's residing in a city.[[8]](#footnote-8) "It seems that this is for the benefit of the Torah scholar, for by way of the sweet things that illuminate the eye of the beholder, it will also illuminate the eye of the heart and of the mind."[[9]](#footnote-9) According to this, we may explain the second clause (beautifulto the eyes) and the third clause (adds wisdom) of the *derasha* as interconnected, and the entire *derasha* as a description of the qualities of the Tree of Knowledge, the fruit of which is delicious, enlightening the eyes and aiding thinking.[[10]](#footnote-10) Rabbi Ze'ev Wolf (the Maharazav), in his commentary on *Midrash* *Rabba*, expands upon this idea, and explains the addition of wisdom as resulting from eating fine foods: "That which it says ‘it adds wisdom,’ this means that every good food has this quality that it settles the mind and wisdom increases, and if he has the holy spirit, the holy spirit rests upon him by way of the good taste…"

Thus far, we have engaged in explaining the wording of the *derasha.* Let us now move on to its conceptual dimensions.

### Conceptual explanation

### The Dynamics of Seduction

Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra's *derasha* focuses entirely on characterizing the excellent objective qualities of the Tree of Knowledge. This is evidenced by the formulations appearing in the *derasha*: "Three things are said about the tree," and "the three are said in the same verse," which relate to the words of the verse as truths presented by the Torah, even before they become the words of the woman.

The classical biblical commentators interpret the verse as expressing different aspects of the woman's mood following the serpent's words of seduction. Thus, Rashi emphasizes the power of rhetoric, while noting the logical symmetry between the words of the serpent and the description of the temptation to eat from the tree:

"And the woman saw" — she approved the words of the serpent; they pleased her and she believed it.

"That the tree was good" — to make her become like God.

"And that it was a delight to the eyes" — even as it had said to her: "Then your eyes shall be opened."

"And that the tree was to be desired to make one wise" — as it had said to her: "Knowing good and evil."

This interpretation is based on the account of the serpent's words of seduction in verses 1-5 and their expansion in the Midrash.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Ramban takes a different path and proposes another avenue of interpretation, which sees in the words of the verse a model for the psychological dynamics of seduction. As opposed to Rashi, who emphasizes the symmetry between the words of the serpent and the way Chava looks at the tree, Ramban understands that Chava's present manner of viewing the tree does not relate directly to the content of the serpent's words, but rather to the barrier that has been removed from her consciousness in the wake of her conversation with it. The tree is no longer a forbidden object, but rather an object of desire. As such, she attributes to it qualities that reflect her new concrete experience of lust and desire. According to Ramban, even without eating from the tree, lust and desire enter the woman's heart in the wake of the serpent's words. The change of consciousness occurs even before eating.

Thus, both commentators, Rashi and Ramban, explain the verse in the context of the sequence of the previous verses.

Our examination of the interpretations of Rashi and Ramban reinforces the perception that Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra detaches the verse in question from the context of the sin and the seduction resulting from the words of the serpent, emphasizing the qualities of the Tree of Knowledge as facts that stand on their own. According to him, the words of the verse do not express the woman's desire for the forbidden fruit or her adoption of the serpent's way of thinking.

### The banality of the forbidden fruit

In the wake of what has been said, we may ask: What is the significance of these qualities of the tree, according to Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra? Should we (and if so, how are we to) read his *derasha* within the context of the story of eating from the Tree of Knowledge as it appears in the Torah?

Let us continue with the words of the Maharazav, ad loc.:

One must see and understand that the intention of the statement is not to tell of the virtues of the Tree of Knowledge in particular, but rather of the virtues and perfection of all good food… He finds these three virtues alluded to in this verse… That in addition to its being delicious and satisfying, it must also be beautiful to the eye, for then one becomes satisfied from and takes pleasure in it. And that which he says, “it adds wisdom,” this mean that all good food has this virtue that it settles the mind and wisdom is increased in one who partakes.

He adduces proof for his understanding of the *derasha* from *Bereishit Rabba* 65 (cited above), which brings the *derasha* of Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra in the context of food in general, regarding Yitzchak who cannot fully enjoy his food owing to his blindness. In other words, the subject of the *derasha* is the perfect food for man, and there is no essential connection between the *derasha* relating to the verse and the context in *Bereishit*; rather, it falls into the category of an *asmakhta,* so that the verse merely provides a foothold for a tangentially related point.

Conceptually, the content of the *derasha* blurs the uniqueness of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge in comparison to other food. The Tree of Knowledge is a perfect but ordinary tree, and the positive qualities of its fruit do not exceed those of beautiful fruit in all places and at all times. The experience of eating is experienced by human beings on different planes and at different stages, by way of the food's taste (and appearance) before and in the course of eating, and even afterwards. This blurring follows also from the passage in *Bereishit Rabba* 65 (cited above), as noted by the Maharazav.

There is, however, room to express reservations about the Maharazav's approach in defining the purpose of Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra's *derasha*, and in severing the *derasha* from the context of the verse. Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra's *derasha* deals with perfect food, but the significance of the *derasha* should be identified in direct relationship to eating from the Tree of Knowledge. It is difficult to imagine that Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra's entire concern in the *derasha* is about the qualities of the perfect food, especially in such a loaded and fundamental verse that relates to the sin of Adam and Chava in eating from the Tree of Knowledge. So too it is difficult to imagine that this is the way it is viewed by the compiler of *Bereishit* Rabba, who inserts this *derasha* immediately after the lengthy detailing of the serpent's words of seduction to Chava, which end: "'When the woman saw' — she approved the words of the serpent."[[12]](#footnote-12)

A question may also be raised regarding relying on *Bereishit Rabba* 65 as a proof. We have already noted above that this source opens with Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra's *derasha* and expands upon it with regard to Yitzchak; but it is not at all clear that this expansion may be attributed to Rabbi Yosei. This expansion might very well be the words of the compiler of the work, or of some other sage. Hence, it is not at all simple to infer anything from the expansion about the subject of Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra's *derasha* in its original context.

What, then, is the meaning of the *derasha* in its context? It seems that Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra comes to say that the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge is not bad, but rather good and praiseworthy. Let us reexamine the *derasha*, this time in its context in *Bereishit Rabba*:

Rabbi Yehoshua of Sakhnin said in the name of Rabbi Levi: At first [the serpent] spoke as an informant about its Creator, saying: He ate from this tree and created the world, and now He says to you: “You shall not eat from it,” so that you not create other worlds. Everyone hates members of his own craft.

Rabbi Yehuda ben Simon said: It said: Whatever was created after something else rules that other thing… You were created after everything else to rule over everything. Go out and eat before He creates other worlds, and they will rule over you. This is what is stated: "When the woman saw that the tree was good" [she approved of the words of the serpent].

Rabbi Elazar said in the name of Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra:

Three things are said about the tree: It is good for food, it is beautiful to the eyes, and it adds wisdom.

And the three are said in the same verse:

"And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food" — from here that it is good for food.

"And that it was a delight to the eyes" — from here that it is beautiful to the eyes.

"And that the tree was to be desired to make one wise" — from here that it adds wisdom.

This is what is stated: “A *maskil* of Eitan Ha-Ezrachi" (*Tehillim* 89:1).

The serpent's words of seduction attribute magical powers to the forbidden fruit. Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra's words place the reader before the fruit as it is, precisely like the woman, in order to emphasize that the fruit is just fruit.[[13]](#footnote-13) To counter the imaginary elements of the seduction, the *derasha* sets up a mirror that reflects the reality. This being the case, the *derasha* has a literary-substantive role in the sequence of *derashot*.

This *derasha* has fascinating educational implications. The emphasis on the banality of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden stresses the fact that obeying or disobeying the Divine command not to eat of it is the sole focus of good and evil. In addition, it continues the biblical story that sets man's experience of eating as a fundamental experience not only for man's survival, but also for realizing his spiritual powers and his relationship to God, outside the Garden of Eden as within it. Eating becomes an arena of struggle, sort of a reflection of Adam's test in the Garden of Eden.[[14]](#footnote-14) As mentioned, another aspect of the *derasha* is the very denial of any magical element in the fruit.[[15]](#footnote-15)

### The aesthetic experience

In the wake of this *derasha*, we can describe the moment that a person reveals a huge truth about the world and sees vitality in a particular point in reality that he or she has been previously unaware of. This is not imagined, a person simply walks blindly in the world, failing to notice what is around him or her. Wisdom is not always to take from all the perfection found in God's world, but rather to be able to observe that perfection and not take it. Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra presents us here with an experience that parallels the aesthetic experience in Kantian philosophy — to face the beauty of the world without even thinking about using it for one's own needs or satisfactions.[[16]](#footnote-16) This is true even if we understand that Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra's *derasha* does not refer to the aesthetic plane.

We will conclude our discussion with another statement of Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra, in which he transfers the reality of the Garden of Eden as it is described in a verse to the reality of life in this world. He expounds the verse: "But there went up a mist from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground" (*Bereishit* 2:6), regarding economic success in the realm of trade:

Rabbi Elazar said in the name of Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra: Everything is blessed, commerce is blessed, and traders profit. (*Bereishit Rabba* 13, 16)

Perhaps the whole point of the Garden of Eden story, in the eyes of Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra, is for us to understand that even our lives in this imperfect world are connected to the Garden of Eden, and it is upon us to perfect this world and to reveal it once again as the Garden of God.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. The phrase "good for food" does not appear elsewhere in Rabbinic literaure, and so we cannot assess its meaning in other places. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See the parallels in *Kohelet Rabba* 5, 1, and in BT *Yoma* 74b. Based on this discussion, it may be argued that this idea is deeply rooted in the consciousness of the Amoraim of Eretz Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See also BT *Eiruvin* 29a. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See E. Z. Melamed, *Milon Le-targumim Ha-Aramiyim U-ltargum She-beMikra* (Jerusalem: 1975), p. 31. In his translation of *Bereishit* 2:9, Onkelos renders "*nechmad le-mareh*" exactly the same way that he translates "*nechmad ha-etz le-haskil*": "the tree was desirable to look at." That is to say, he equates the meaning of "*nechmad le-mareh*" and "*nechmad le-haskil*" by translating the latter term as "*le-istakala*," in the sense of looking. It should be noted that the the verb "*le-histakel*" in Rabbinic literature combines two meaning, physical seeing and intellectual understanding (much like *re'iya* in *Tanakh*). It should further be noted that according to Onkelos, the Tree of Knowledge differs from the rest of the trees in the Garden of Eden in its medicinal qualities.  [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. There is a strong substantive relationship between avarice and the desire to acquire; avarice will lead a person to continue pursuing an object of desire. However, there is not a hint of this connection in Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra's *derasha.* So too, the fact noted earlier that the entire *derasha* relates to the objective qualities of the tree reinforces the rejection of this interpretive direction in his words. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See *Vayikra Rabba* 89, 1; *Pesikta deRav Kahana* 4; BT *Bava Batra* 15a. It seems to me that the source of this identification is Rav, but this is not the forum to expand upon the matter. Regarding the identity of Eitan Ha-Ezrachi in *Tanakh*, see I *Melakhim* 5:10-11; *I Divrei Ha-yamim* 2:6; *Da'at Mikra*, *Melakhim*, Vol. 1 (Jerusalem: 1989), p. 96 and n. 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. There are three third- and fourth-generation Amoraim in Eretz Israel named Rabbi Acha: Rabbi Acha bar Chanina, Rabbi Acha bar Yitzchak, and Rabbi Acha *Sar Ha-bira*; but unless otherwise specified, `"Rabbi Acha" refers to the Tanna Rabbi Acha. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. BT *Sanhedrin* 17b; see also BT *Yoma* 83b. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See also *Otzar Ha-melekh*, *Hilkhot De'ot* 4:23. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. It should be noted that this interpretation is close to the understanding of "beautiful to the eyes" as relating to the realm of health. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See *Bereishit Rabba* 19, 3-6, ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 173. This approach is found also in *Avot De-Rabbi Natan*, Version 1, Chap. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This argument is based on the assumption that *Bereishit Rabba* is a carefully compiled work, and not just a collection of *derashot* in the order of the Torah's verses. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This message may underlie the *derasha* regarding the identity of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge as one of the fruits familiar to man: wheat, grape, fig or citron. See *Bereishit Rabba* 15, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This idea has been developed in Chasidic thought and finds expression in the idea of raising sparks and in the idea of mealtime as a time of war. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The myth of the Tree of Knowledge and the positive qualities of its fruit was common in the Hellenistic world. The question of whether influence is evident in the way that the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge is presented, in the Midrash of Eretz Israel in general and in this *derasha* of Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra in particular, goes beyond the scope of the present discussion. One may ask how Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra would explain the difference arising from a comparison of the verse under discussion to the description of the trees given as food for man in the Garden of Eden in *Bereishit* 2:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The Torah's wording in this regard revolves around the axis of beauty: good-delight-desire-eyes. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)