YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

Dedicated in memory of Rabbi Jack Sable z”l and
Ambassador Yehuda Avner z”l,
by Debbie and David Sable

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

In honor of our nephews and niece
for their past studies at YHE and Migdal Oz - Sharon and Joel Chefitz

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

**Parashat Bereishit:**

**The Lie in the Garden of Eden**

**Dr. Yoshi Fargeon**

**I. Introduction[[1]](#footnote-1)**

 Lies and deception are very common in our lives as human beings and people of culture. Even though we proclaim our love for the truth and generally try to stick to it, we are liable to veer from it – not only in matters of great significance, but often as a matter of politeness and to promote peaceful relations with our neighbors. We lie to ourselves and others to such an extent that we perceive entire areas of our lives as the natural domain of the lie. It was not for naught that *Chazal* called our world "the world of lies."[[2]](#footnote-2)

Even though the Torah is called the "Torah of truth," its stories about human beings contain many accounts of lies and deceptions. Even if we limit ourselves to the stories in the book of *Bereishit*, we encounter many untruthful characters, including the Patriarchs and Matriarchs:

1. Avraham and Yitzchak claim that Sara and Rivka are their respective sisters in order to save themselves from death (12:10-20; 20:2; 26:7-11).

2. Sara’s fear brings her to deny the truth and claim that she did not laugh (18:15).

3. Yaakov lies to his father in his attempt to acquire the blessings that Yitzchak intended to give to Esav (27:15-24).

4. Rachel lies to her father to prevent his finding the *terafim* (31:35).

5. The sons of Yaakov lie to Shekhem and Chamor in order to exact revenge for the offense committed against Dina (34:13-17), and deceive Yaakov with respect to the fate of Yosef (37:31-32).

In the book of *Bereishit* alone, we find over ninety instances of lies and deceptions!

In contrast to human beings, God is generally perceived as entirely trustworthy, limited neither in knowledge nor in abilities, as stated in Bil'am’s prophecy:[[3]](#footnote-3)

God is not a man, that he should **lie**; neither the son of man that He should **repent**: when He has said, will He not do it? or when He has spoken, will He not make it good? (*Bamidbar* 23:19)

Man, it may be inferred, is unreliable in two respects. First, he lies, saying things he has no intention of doing; second, he repents, reneging on his previous commitments and breaking them. In God we find the opposite of these two characteristics.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In the face of these and similar verses, *Chazal* made a daring statement, presenting the lie as the only thing in the world that is totally unconnected to God:

The Holy One, blessed be He, created everything in His world, except for the lies that he did not create… As it is stated: "The Rock, His work is perfect; for all His ways are justice; a God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and right is He" (*Devarim* 32:4). (*Tanna de-bei Eliyahu*, *Seder Eliyahu Zuta* 3)[[5]](#footnote-5)

This prevailing view regarding God’s credibility not only emerges from the verses of the Bible, but again and again influences the way we interpret them. For example, Yaira Amit believes that "the credibility… of the figure of God in the biblical story is an initial-axiomatic assumption"[[6]](#footnote-6) for anyone who wishes to interpret the Bible according to its plain meaning. The belief in God's integrity is not merely a religious or philosophical matter,[[7]](#footnote-7) but a necessary working premise for one who seeks to interpret the Bible according to its plain meaning:

The narrative world constructed in the Bible has clear rules… According to these rules God is always above all suspicion and His words are perceived as trustworthy... Not only must God and the narrator be trustworthy, but they also become a criterion of trustworthiness for all the other characters. Anything that is consistent... with the word of God is indisputable."[[8]](#footnote-8)

 These words, which must sound trivial to some of our readers, are put to a first and surprising test already in the story of the Garden of Eden (*Bereishit* 2-3) – a story at the heart of which stands the question of God's trustworthiness. Surprisingly, God's opponent in this story is none other than the serpent.

**II. The Serpent Accuses God of Lying**

In one of God's first appeals to man, perhaps even His first such appeal, He issues the following command: "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat of it," and adds: "for in the day that you eat of it, you shall surely die" (*Bereishit* 2:17).

Several verses later, the serpent opens a conversation with the woman:

Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman: Has God said: You shall not eat of any tree of the garden? And the woman said to the serpent: Of the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said: You shall not eat of it, neither shall you touch it, lest you die. And the serpent said to the woman: You shall not surely die; for God does know that in the day you eat of it, then your eyes shall be opened, and you shall be as God, knowing good and evil. (*Bereishit* 3:1-5)

The serpent presents himself to the woman as if he doesn't know exactly what God had commanded. However, after the woman presents him with the command as she knows it,[[9]](#footnote-9) it turns out that the snake knows very well the limits and wording of the original command, but he denies its truth.

Contrary to the words of God, **"for in the day that you eat of it, you shall surely die"** (2:17), the serpent asserts: **"You shall not surely die"** (3:4).[[10]](#footnote-10) The serpent makes use of God's formulation, and adds an explanation of His decision to deceive them:

For God does know **that in the day you eat of it,** then your eyes shall be opened, and you shall be as God, knowing good and evil. (3:5)

This is how Rabbi Yosef Bekhor Shor explains the words of the serpent:

He said to her: Fool! He did not have your good in mind, nor is it a potion of death, **and you shall not surely die** if you eat of it. He had only your detriment in mind, for it is so good that He does not want you to eat of it, for if you eat of it, you will become wise and cunning, and you will be like the angels to distinguish between good and evil, to grow wise and cunning… But He does not want you to come to the level of the angels. (Rabbi Yosef Bekhor Shor, Commentary to *Bereishit* 3:5)

According to the serpent's explanation, God lied to man in order to keep him in his ignorance, and thereby preserve His qualitative advantage and special status as one who knows good and evil.

This impudent claim leads the reader to see the serpent as a shyster who tries to kill humanity through the power of his mouth, as do his descendants until this very day.[[11]](#footnote-11) To our surprise, however, the woman does not reject the serpent's words, but tries to understand the nature of the tree:

And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise. (3:6)

Upon examination, it becomes clear to the woman that the tree is similar in its first two features to the other trees in the garden (good for food and a delight to the eyes; compare to 2:9), and superior to all the other trees in the garden in its third feature, "to be desired to make one wise" – precisely as argued by the serpent! Since the results of her examination appear to contradict the threat uttered by God, and at the same time they seem to accord with the words of the serpent, this was enough to convince the woman that the serpent was more trustworthy than God. In the words of Rabbi Yosef Bekhor Shor:

She began to look at it, and said: How beautiful is this fruit, how pleasant is its fragrance! It is certainly not similar to a death potion, and it was not for naught that the Holy One, blessed be He, commanded us not to eat of it… She said: It seems that the serpent speaks the truth…. (Commentary of Rabbi Yosef Bekhor Shor, ad loc.)

The woman no longer sees any point in delaying or consulting, and takes immediate action:

She took of its fruit, and did eat; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he did eat. (3:6)

**III. Consequences of the Eating – Death or Knowledge?**

 At this point, the reader is overcome with considerable tension, for he must choose between two bad alternatives. He can either hold fast to the assumption that the serpent is lying, in which case he should expect the immediate death of Adam and his wife (2:17: "for in the day that you eat of it, you shall surely die"), or he can choose to pay the heavy theological price of believing that it was the serpent who spoke the truth, in which case he should expect the man and his wife to acquire knowledge (3:5: "that in the day you eat of it, then your eyes shall be opened").

Surprisingly, the narrator seems to decide between the alternatives immediately in the next verse, with the statement: "And the eyes of them both were opened" (3:7) – precisely as the serpent had argued would happen![[12]](#footnote-12)

In contrast, man does not die on the day of his eating of the forbidden fruit, as God had said he would, and not even in that year. In fact, he is granted nine hundred and thirty years of life![[13]](#footnote-13) Moshe David Cassuto lists six common attempts to resolve this problem:

The expression, "you shall surely die," is difficult, for the man did not die at that time, but lived to the age of **nine hundred and thirty years.** Therefore, different interpretations have been proposed for **"you shall surely die"**: 1) You will be overcome with difficult afflictions that are like the beginning of death; 2) You will not reach the lifespan that had originally been designated for you, namely, a thousand years; 3) You will be liable for death, and that death will come upon you at the time of My choosing; 4) **"You shall surely die"** is stated here as an exaggeration, in order to distance man from transgression; 5) The reference here is to actual **death,** only that afterwards God sweetened the verdict, because the man repented; 6) Now you are immortal, then you will be mortal. (Cassuto, *Bereishit*, p.82)[[14]](#footnote-14)

Cassuto points out the shortcomings of all these explanations,[[15]](#footnote-15) and then offers his own explanation:

When you eat of the tree of knowledge, it will be decreed against you never to eat from the tree of life; that is, you will never be able to attain eternal life, and you will one day have to die. **You shall surely die**,literally. It was necessary to use simple words like these, "**you shall surely die**,"because the man, who had not yet eaten of the tree of knowledge at that time, was innocent as a child, and knew nothing, and could not comprehend further details. (ibid.)[[16]](#footnote-16)

Ostensibly, we can apply to all of these explanations (including that of Cassuto) what Cassuto himself said:

All of these explanations, and others like them, do not accord with the words of Scripture. A clear and simple expression like **"you shall surely die"** should only be interpreted in its plain sense. (ibid.)

If the multiple explanations nevertheless raise doubts in us as to whose testimony is more credible, that of God or that of the serpent, the admission of God Himself comes and decides the issue:

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. (3:22)

With these words, God openly confirms the serpent's claim regarding the nature of the tree of knowledge,[[17]](#footnote-17) and implicitly confirms the serpent's claim regarding the hidden motives behind the prohibition – fortifying God's status and priority over human beings.[[18]](#footnote-18)

**IV. A Re-Examination of the Words of God and the Words of the Serpent**

At this point, one may perhaps come to the hasty (and erroneous, of course) conclusion that the Torah seeks from the very beginning to teach us two lessons: 1) Man should not place absolute trust in the words of God.[[19]](#footnote-19) 2) He should entertain the possibility that God's commands are intended not for the benefit of His creatures, but for the benefit of God himself.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Do we really have to believe that in its opening chapters, Scripture seeks to teach us conclusions that are the very opposite of those it tries to teach us in all other passages?!

Let us re-examine the data. Of the three claims put forward by the serpent ("You shall not surely die," "then your eyes shall be opened," "and you shall be as God, knowing good and evil"), only the last two are explicitly confirmed by Scripture. The astonishment that these claims were confirmed may distract us from the fact that none of the parties involved in the story ever disagreed with them. In fact, the name of the tree, and to some extent its purpose, were already communicated to the man incidental to the command: "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat of it" (2:17).[[21]](#footnote-21) The name of the tree implies that one who eats of it will attain knowledge of good and evil,[[22]](#footnote-22) and the fact that the man is forbidden to eat from it indicates that the fruit and knowledge are intended only for heavenly beings.

This means that the confirmation of the last two points in the words of the serpent has nothing to do with the question of God's trustworthiness, but rather with the man's trustworthiness vis-à-vis the woman[[23]](#footnote-23) (or at least with the question of the woman's trustworthiness vis-à-vis the serpent). The only "dispute" between God and the serpent is whether "you shall surely die" or "you shall not surely die."

 What then is the nature of this threat of death? We might assume that the death will be a result of the eating, like a "death potion." This interpretation accords well with the words of God as they are formulated by the woman, "lest [*pen*]you die." The use of the word *pen*, one of whose meanings is "so that you not,"[[24]](#footnote-24) accords with a description of a "natural" result stemming directly from an action.

For example, when the people of Israel, who fear hearing the voice of God, say to Moshe: "Speak you with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, **lest [*pen*] we die**" (*Shemot* 20:15), they mean "so that we not die." The reference here is, of course, not to God's deliberate killing of them but to a "natural" result of hearing God's voice.

However, the Divine "threat" to man in its original formulation is worded differently: “you shall surely die [*mot tamut*]” (2:17). This is a clear legal formulation; it does not indicate a natural consequence of the eating, but rather a punishment that will be imposed in the wake of eating the forbidden fruit, similar to legal formulations elsewhere.[[25]](#footnote-25)

In principle, it is difficult to see a lie in any statement about the future (as long as the speaker believes what he is saying at the time of the statement), and certainly not in the case of an unrealized threat (often the purpose of the threat is so that there be no need to realize it), and especially when this threat is supposed to be applied to a real legal case. In many legal systems, the punishment specified in the book of laws is indeed a basis for punishment, but in practice the sentence is determined after taking into account the circumstances of the event in question.[[26]](#footnote-26)

The Divine treatment in the story of the sin in the Garden of Eden carries quasi-legal signs, which find expression in the interrogation of the defendants and in the punishment that is fitted measure for measure to their sins.[[27]](#footnote-27)

In His interrogation, God "discovers" that while the man and his wife transgressed the command that He had given them, they did so not on their own initiative but because of the serpent who persuaded them to act in that manner.

**V. The Significance of Persuasion**

From the fact that the woman claims in her defence, "the serpent beguiled me, and I did eat" (3:13), and to some extent also from the man's defence claim, "the woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat" (3:12), we learn that they thought that the fact that they were persuaded lessens somewhat their degree of guilt.[[28]](#footnote-28) It stands to reason that a similar position is embedded in the narrative choice to devote a significant portion of our story to the act of persuasion.

God's decree is consistent with this reading, for He severely punishes the persuader, even though he did not violate any explicit commandment. The punishment for the man and his wife also does not amount to the death sentence announced by God in advance, but includes several clauses, both of leniency (they do not die immediately) and of severity (e.g., painful childbirth and hard labor), in accordance with the precise circumstances of the case. In any case, the fact that the man did not die on the day of his eating says nothing about God's trustworthiness, but about His action as a careful and attentive judge.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Finally, it should be noted that even if we assume a judge is absolutely bound by the wording of the law and lacks the authority to consider the circumstances of the specific case, and even if we ignore the fact that in this exceptional case, the lawgiver and the judge (not to mention the investigator and the executioner) are one and the same, it can be argued that God's sentence may be considered an interpretation (albeit exaggerated) of the words of the law itself.

The Divine threat, "for in the day that you eat of it, you shall surely die" (2:17), was fulfilled in a certain sense, for on that day it was decreed that the man would die. The obstruction of the tree of life and the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, which were part of the Divine response to his sin, determined man's destiny to return to dust.

It may be argued that while the man may actually have died only many centuries later, he began the process on the day that he ate from the tree of knowledge! It can certainly be said that God revealed Himself here as fully trustworthy, for even though He chose to punish the man with a lighter punishment (taking into account the circumstances of the case), He found a way to do so in a manner that somewhat matches the wording of the original command.[[30]](#footnote-30)

**VI. World of Lies**

Our story does not explain the motives of the serpent. It is commonly thought, however, that when the serpent persuades the woman by arguing "You shall not surely die" (3:4), he believes that God will kill her for her sin. In other words, the serpent tempts the woman to believe that God is lying, precisely because he is sure that God is telling the truth.

One might have expected that the man and his wife would die, in accordance with the true words of God and contrary to the false words of the serpent. Here, however, the story presents us with another surprise. Since the woman is influenced by the serpent and believes in the truth of his words, God has mercy on her and does not kill her.

Paradoxically, the false words of the serpent turn out to be true, for God does not kill the man and his wife, and it is precisely the true words of God that are cancelled.

With this, we come to the last reversal, when God punishes human beings with a punishment that accords somewhat with the lie of the serpent – for the man will live for many centuries to come. At the same time, however, it accords with the words of God, for death was indeed decreed for man on that day. Before our eyes, the truth and the lie in the story are almost indistinguishably intertwined. Perhaps this also foretells events of the future, in our world which has been called the "world of lies."

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. For more on this topic in particular and the issue of God's attitude toward lying in general, see my doctoral dissertation [Yoshi Fargeon, "'*Lama Tat'einu Hashem*?' *Me'uravuto shel Elohim bi-Shekarim u-be-Hat'ayot be-Sipur ha-Mikra'i*, Bar Ilan University 5774], especially pp. 50-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Based on *Vayikra Rabba* 21, 1 (vol. 3, p. 605). On the frequency of lies in our lives, see, for example, Cohen [A. Cohen, *Olam ha-Sheker: Hebetim Pesikhologoyim* *u-Filosophiyim, Ishiyim ve-Chevratiyim, Politiyim u-Mishpatiyim, Sifrutiyim ve-Emunatiyim*, Haifa 5759], pp. 60-76 (see additional bibliography there); Elad [A. Elad, *Ha-Pesikhologiya shel ha-Sheker ve-Shitot le-Chasifato*, Raman Gan 5766 (2005), pp. 23-26 (see additional bibliography there). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Similarly, the prophet Shmuel says to Shaul: "And also the Glory of Israel will not lie nor repent; for He is not a man, that He should repent" (I Shmuel15:29). See also *Tehilim* 12, which deals primarily with the contrast between the lie that characterizes human speech and the truth that characterizes the word of God. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Thus, for example, the Ralbag explains, ad loc.: "God is not on the level of **man that He should lie,** for by Him there is nothing but the truth. Nor does He repent of what He decided to do, for He is not **a man that he should repent**" (Ralbag, *Bamidbar* 23:19). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A similar midrashic exposition is brought in *Peskita Rabati*: "Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman said: We find that the Holy One, blessed be He, created everything in His world, except for the attribute of lying that He did not create and the attribute of falsehood that He did not execute, but rather people made it up on their own" (*Pesikta Rabati* 24, 125b). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Amit 5757 [Y. Amit, "*'Netzach Yisrael Lo Yeshaker ve-Lo Yinachem Ki Lo Adam Hu le-Henachem*': *Al Mehemnut ha-Mesaper ve-ha-Doverim be-Sipur ha-Mikra'i*,"Y. Hoffman and P. Pollack (eds.), *Or le-Ya'akov: Mechkarim be-Mikra u-vi-Megilot Midbar Yehuda le-Zikhro shel Yaakov Shalom Licht*, Jerusalem 5757, pp. 45-56], p. 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See, for example, Plato, *The Republic* II, who dedicates one of the dialogues to prove the trustworthiness of God – a proof that ends with a firm conclusion that forbids giving a stage to those who dare to disagree with it. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Y. Amit, *Likro Sipur Mikra'i,* Jerusalem 5760 (2000), pp. 98-100. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The woman does not quote God's command precisely. Many understand that the changes in the woman's formulation are the result of her exaggeration. See, for example: *Midrash Tehilim* 1, 9 [Vilna 1891, II, p. 10]; Rashi to *Bereishit* 3:3; Ibn Ezra, short commentary to *Bereishit* 3:1; Radak to *Bereishit* 3:2-3; Y. Kil, *Sefer Bereishit* [*Da'at Mikra*, vol. 1, Jerusalem 5757], p. 71; Zakovitz [*Abi'a Chidot meni Kedem: Chidot ve-Chalomot – Chida be-Siporet ha-Mikra'it*, Tel Aviv 5766 (2005)] p. 101; Gelander, p. 191 [Sh. Gelander, *Sefer Bereishit* (Open University), vol. I, Raanana 5770 (2009)].

But, in light of the fact that the woman does not call the tree "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil," we can assume that the other gaps between God's command and her phrasing of it stem from an inaccurate transmission of the command by the man. See, for example: Rav Saadya Gaon to *Bereishit*, pp. 286-287; Bar Yefet, *Chem'at Chemda* [Sh. Bar Yefet ha-Rofe, *Chem'at Chemda: Bereishit*, Jerusalem 5763], p. 12); Dershowitz (A.M. Dershowitz, *Tzedek mi-Bereishit: Asara Ma'asei I-Tzedek be-Derekh le-Aseret ha-Dibrot u-le-Mishpat ha-Moderni* [translated by A. Paz], Haifa and Or Yehuda 5763 [2003], p. 36). It is possible that the man feared the temptation that the tree was likely to present to the woman, and therefore he chose to omit the seductive name of the tree, to present death as arising directly from eating, and to add a prohibition of touching the tree.

It was precisely these changes to God's command that made the woman more likely to be seduced by the serpent, as stated in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*:

"What fence did the first man make for his words?... The first man did not want to say to Chava as the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him. But rather he said to her as follows: 'But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said: You shall not eat of it, neither shall you touch it, lest you die' (3:3). At that time, the evil serpent thought in his heart: Since I cannot cause the man to stumble, I will go and cause Chava to stumble. He went and sat down next to her and had an extended conversation with her. He said to her: If you say that the Holy One, blessed be He, commanded us about touching the tree, I am touching it and I am not dead; you, too, if you touch it, you will not die… What did Chava say to herself: Everything that my master commanded me from the beginning is a lie" (*Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, version A, 1).

If so, it is possible that the Torah seeks to allude already at the beginning to what Moshe will say many generations later: "All this word which I command you, that you shall observe to do; you shall not add thereto, nor diminish from it" (*Devarim* 13:1).

If so, it is not God who is the source of the lack of truth in the story, but rather His creatures: first the man and then the serpent. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Usually, the vigorous negation is formulated in the form of *mot lo temutun,* with the negative appearing between the infinitive form of the verb and its declined form. The unusual formulation found here, which sets the word *lo* before the two verbs *mot temutun*, appears as if it comes to quote the words of God, and to precede them with the word *lo* in order to negate them. See, for example, Emanueli [Y.M. Emanueli, *Sefer Bereishit: Hesberim ve-He'arot*, Tel Aviv 5737 (1978)], p. 81.

On the other hand, some argue that this unusual negation is intended to introduce ambiguity into the serpent's words, so they do not necessarily disagree with the words of God. See, for example, Roth [Y. Roth, "*Ha-Shimush be-Dibur ha-Du-Mashma'i ha-Mekhuvan be-Sipur ha-Mikra'i*,*" Tarbiz* 41 (5732)], pp. 253-254. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Alon [E. Alon, "*Zochalim bi-Mesoret Yisrael*," *Ha-Chai ve-ha-Tzome'ach shel Eretz Yisrael: Encyclopedia Shimushit Me'uyeret* V, Raanana 1984] says:

"The ancients had difficulty determining what a venomous snake has that gives it the power to inflict such damage on its prey. Some attributed its venomous force to the cleft tongue that the snake sends forth from its mouth and waves in the air: 'They have sharpened their tongue like a serpent' (*Tehilim*140:4); 'The viper's tongue shall slay him' (*Iyov* 20:16). Others believed in the power of the snake's hissing: 'The sound of it shall go like the serpent's' (*Yirmeyahu* 46:22)…." (*Ha-Chai ve-ha-Tzome'ach*, p. 177). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The Ramban (2:9) mentions a midrashic source (whose origin is uncertain) that says: "Three spoke the **truth** and perished from the world: **The serpent,** the spies, and Doeg the Edomite." This implies that the serpent's words "You shall not surely die" (3:4) were perceived as true. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See *Bereishit* 5:5. The fact is that we do not know how much time elapsed from the creation of the man until he was sentenced to death, and thus we do not know how many years elapsed from his sin to his death. In the book of Jubilees, we find the dates of his entry and exit (3:9-32), but they probably originate in the midrashic method used by its author with respect to dates (see Segal [M. Segal, *Sefer ha-Yovelim: Shikhtuv* *ha-Mikra*, *Arikha*, *Emunot* *ve-De'ot*, Jerusalem 5768], pp. 37-46). Rav Saadya correctly wrote: "How much time the man spent in the Garden of Eden is not set in Scripture or passed down by tradition, and needless to say, it cannot be reached with the help of the intellect. But we know that he was there for many days, and he worked the garden and watched over it until the serpent became jealous of them" (3:4). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. M. D. Cassuto, *Peirush al Sefer Bereishit*, Jerusalem 5725 (5704-5709), "*Mei-Adam ve-ad Noach*, p. 82. See also Rav Saadya's review of the book of *Bereishit*, pp. 275-276. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The deficiency of the fourth suggestion according to Cassuto (ibid.) is of particular interest: "It is unimaginable that Scripture attributes to God words of exaggeration that do not parallel His true intention." In his opinion, then, God's trustworthiness is an axiomatic assumption, the very deviation from which turns the explanation into one that is unacceptable. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. I added the number "7" in the citation of this explanation. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Thus, for example, writes Ehrlich [A. B. Ehrlich, *Mikra ki-Peshuto*, vol. 1, New York 1969, p. 10]: "'As God'- Were it not for the fact that God Himself afterwards said: 'Behold, the man is become like one of us,' I would have said that the serpent exaggerated the praise of the tree so that the woman would desire it, Because of that verse, however, one cannot say that." [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. This direction is also supported by parallels from the Ancient Near East, such as the myth of Adapa (S. Shifra and Y. Klein, *Ba-Yamim ha-Rechokim ha-Hem: Antologiya mi-Shirat ha-Mizrach ha-Kadum*, Tel Aviv 5757 (1996), pp. 131-138; see also A. Horowitz, "*Diyukano shel ha-El ha-Mesopotami*," in: M. Kister et al. (eds.), *Elei Kedem: Ha-Poloteism be-Eretz Yisrael u-Shekhenoteha min ha-Elef ha-Sheni lifnei ha-Sefira ve-ad ha-Tekufa ha-Muslamit*, Jerusalem 5768 (2008), pp. 19-22, 24-25).

Some maintain that blocking the way of the tree of life was meant only to prevent man from violating the Divine decree, "for dust you are, and to dust shall you return" (3:19), as the Ramban says (ad loc.): "The Holy One, blessed be He, wanted His decree regarding the death of man to be fulfilled, and were he to eat from the tree of life, which was created to give those who eat from it eternal life, the decree would be cancelled." However, opening God's words with the assertion: "Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil" (3:22), and not with an assertion such as: "Behold, I said to the man, you shall surely die," indicate that "God's standing" and not "the realization of man's punishment" is what underlies the blocking of the way of the tree of life. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. This is the conclusion of Beattie [D. R. G. Beattie, "What is Genesis 2-3 About?" *The Expository Times* 92 (1980)], p. 10, from the story. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. This is the conclusion of Carmichael [M. C. Carmichael, “The Paradise Myth: Interpreting without Jewish and Christian Spectacles”, in P. Morris & D. Sawyer (eds.), *A Walk in the Garden: Biblical, Iconographical and Literary Images of Eden* (JSOTSS 136), Sheffield 1992, pp. 47-63] from the story; see, for example, his remarks on pp. 47-48, 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. It is important to note that throughout the story of the sin (chapter 3), the tree is mentioned not by its name, but by various designations, such as "the tree" or "the tree which I commanded you that you should not eat." *Bereishit Rabati* 2, 9 (pp. 52-53) learns from this that only in the wake of the sin is the tree called "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil": "The pious Moshe called it from the beginning 'the tree of the knowledge of good and evil' [in chapter 2] because of its end, as we find that many things were written because of their end." (See also *Midrash Agada* to *Bereishit* 2:17 [vol. 1, p. 6]; Ramban 2:9.) It seems, however, preferable to assume that we are dealing here with a deliberate gap between God's command to the man and His command in the words of the woman, because her words contain at least another two significant changes from God's command (see above note 9). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Thus, for example, writes Kahana [A. Kahana, *Sefer Bereishit* (Tanach Kahana), Jerusalem 5729, p. 12]: "'And from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.' If so, the serpent did not later inform Chava about almost anything, except that he explained to her that by knowing good and evil, man would be like God." See also Rav Saadya Gaon to *Bereishit*, pp. 287, 292, and 298. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See above, note 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. M. Tz. Kadari, *Milon ha-Ivrit ha-Mikra'it: Otzar Lashon ha-Mikra mei-Alef ve-ad Tav*, Ramat Gan 5766 (2006), p. 862. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See, for example, *Bereishit* 20:7; I *Shemuel* 14:44; 22:16; I *Melakhim* 2:37, 42; II *Melakhim* 1:4, 6, 16; and see Kadari, ibid., p. 594. The difference between the common legal formulation, *mot yumat* (in the *huf'al* conjugation), and the formulation, *mot tamut* (in the *kal* conjugation), is only a result of the difference in the situation: the law does not deal with a concrete case in which the judge stands facing the defendant, but rather it guides the judges regarding how they should deal with a future case involving some defendant. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. For example, Aristotle argues [*Nichomachean Ethics*, V, 10]:

"When therefore the law lays down a general rule, and thereafter a case arises which is an exception to the rule, it is then right… to rectify the defect by deciding as the lawgiver would himself decide if he were present on the occasion… This is the essential nature of the equitable: it is a rectification of law where law is defective because of its generality." [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Y. Yaakovs, *Mida ke-Neged Mida be-Sipur ha-Mikra'i*, Alon Shevut 5766, pp. 145-150. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. According to Kirschenbaum [A. Kirschenbaum, "*Ha-Milkud ve-ha-Hadacha li-Devar Aveira ba-Halakha ha-Yehudit*," *Dinei Yisrael* 15 (5749-5750)], p. 41:"The law of the seducer be as it may, according to Torah law, seduction does not exempt the seduced and release him from conviction [as opposed to the approach of the U.S. Supreme Court], nor even mitigate his punishment [as opposed to the British and Israeli approach]."

Kirschenbaum assumes that in this matter there is no gap between the Oral Law and the Written Law, but the only case he brings as proof is that of the serpent's incitement in the Garden of Eden (ibid., pp. 42, 67). If so, since in our story the change in the severity of the punishment imposed on the man is evident, Kirschenbaum's conclusion must necessarily be reversed. This is even without considering the special complexity of our story, in which the judge is God, and thus the built-in gap between human law and heavenly law (which is also mentioned by Kirschenbaum) may lose its validity. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Gelander [Sh. Gelander, *Sefer Bereishit* (Open University), vol. 1, Raanana 5770 (2009)] rightly notes that God's compassion runs through the stories in the book of *Bereishit*:

"After God's harsh words to the man, Scripture notes: 'And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins, and clothed them' (3:21), that is to say, Scripture tries to conclude the section on concilliatory chords. To these and to additional distinctions concerning the details of the text, it should be added that God does not exhaust the punishments due to people in the various stages of their sins: Even though the man was warned, saying: 'For in the day that you eat of it, you shall surely die' (2:17), He does not put him to death. He even promises protection to Kayin who had killed his brother" (Gelander, *Bereishit,* pp. 75-76). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Unlike the suggestions posed above, I do not claim that the words "*mot tamut*" were originally intended to be interpreted in this way, or that the words of God were formulated in ambiguous language. On the contrary, the phrase "*mot tamut*" was meant to be fulfilled literally. Only in retrospect, given the circumstances of the sin, did God change His intention, while maintaining the formal framework of His words. In this spirit, one should read the words of the *Pesikta Rabati*:

"Once he ate, the angels would sound their voices before the Holy One, blessed be He, as it is stated: 'And they heard the voice of the Lord' (3:8). And what would they say? Master of the universe, that one in the garden, he died and moved on, as it is stated: 'walking in the garden.' Is this not what You decreed upon them: 'For in the day that you eat of it, you shall surely die'? The Holy One, blessed be He, said to them: Perhaps I explained to him a day of Mine, a day of his. A day of Mine, I give him. I give him nine hundred and thirty years and leave for his children seventy years. Therefore, David said: Master of the universe, had you not judged the first man with compassion when he ate from the tree, he would not have lived even one hour." (*Pesikta Rabbati* 40) [↑](#footnote-ref-30)