YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**Rav Meir Shpiegelman**

**parashat bereishit**

**Food for Man and for Animals**

At the conclusion of the sixth day of Creation, following the account of the creation of Man, the Torah describes the foods provided for Man and for the animal kingdom:

And God said: Behold, I have given you every **seed-bearing plant** which is upon the face of all the earth, and **every tree which contains tree-fruit that yields seed**; to you it shall be for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to everything that creeps upon the earth that has within it a living soul, [I have given] **every green plant** for food. And it was so. (*Bereishit* 1:29-30)

At first glance, it seems that the Torah stipulates the identical foods for animals as for Man. In fact, this even seems to make sense: after all, Man is comprised of two components – body and soul. Man’s soul is qualitatively different from the life-force of animals, but the human body is essentially similar to theirs and is nourished by the same foods that sustain them.

However, a closer look at the text reveals a different picture. The Torah permits Man to eat “every seed-bearing plant” and “every tree which contains tree-fruit that yields seed.” The animals, in contrast, are given “every green plant.” Thus, there is actually a dual difference between Man’s nourishment and that of animals: Man eats only “every seed-bearing plant” – in other words, only those plants that contain seeds within them. He may also eat all fruits that bear seeds, while the verse does not mention animals eating fruit at all.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**The gradual relaxation of the restrictions on foods**

This state of affairs, as set forth at the beginning of the *parasha*, changes after Man’s sin:

And to Adam He said, “Because you listened to your wife, and ate of the tree [concerning] which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat of it’ – cursed is the ground on your account; in toil shall you eat of it all the days of your life. And it shall bring forth thorns and thistles for you, and **you shall eat the plants of the field**. By the sweat of your face shall you eat bread, until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust shall you return.” (Bereishit 3:17-19)

After Adam’s sin, God explicitly permits him to eat all types of plants: “And you shall eat the plants of the field.” This sits well with another relaxation of restrictions on foods in the first part of *Sefer Bereishit*: when Man was created, he was forbidden from eating meat; meat was permitted only after the Flood (see *Bereishit* 9:3). Here, we see that there was an intermediate stage as well: in the beginning, Man was permitted to eat only seed-bearing plants; after the sin, all types of plants were permitted; after the Flood, even meat was permitted.

The conventional explanation for the gradual relaxing of prohibitions on types of food is that it reflects the descent of Man’s spiritual level. Immediately after being created, and while in the Garden of Eden, Man was forbidden to eat meat or any plants that did not yield seeds. After the sin, Man’s spiritual status was diminished, and at this lower spiritual level he was permitted to eat all types of vegetation. As human beings continued to sin, their spiritual level deteriorated even further, so that after the Flood, God permitted Noach even to eat meat.

Actually, the permission to eat meat is also preceded by an intermediate stage with regard to the use of animals. The Torah records that after the sin, Adam and Chava fashioned themselves loincloths out of fig leaves (*Bereishit* 3:7), and God later made them garments of skins (3:21). The Torah gives no explanation for why these different coverings are significant, nor why God Himself bothered to make garments for them. It is possible that just as Man was forbidden to eat the flesh of animals, it was also forbidden to use their skins, or to make any use of them that involved the animal’s death.[[2]](#footnote-2) This would explain why God provided garments made of skins for Adam and Chava, particularly after they had already made garments out of fig leaves for themselves: Adam thought that despite his sin, he still remained at the same spiritual level as before. By giving him garments of skins, God showed him that he had descended to a lower level, and henceforth would be permitted to use the skins of animals.

**Kayin vs. Hevel**

Perhaps the conflict between Kayin and Hevel was related to the above stage in the development of the prohibitions on foods:

And after some time, it came to pass that Kayin brought of the fruit of the ground an offering to the Lord. And Hevel, too, brought of the firstborn of his flock and of the fats thereof. And the Lord paid heed to Hevel and to his offering. But to Kayin and to his offering, He did not pay heed. And Kayin was very upset and his countenance fell.” (*Bereishit* 4:3-5)

Despite the sin of Adam and Chava, Kayin brings a vegetarian offering. Hevel, in contrast, understands that once the skins of animals have been permitted as garments, the animals may also be brought as offerings. In other words – Hevel had internalized the consequences of the sin, and therefore brought an animal sacrifice, while Kayin did not fully appreciate the new reality, and conducted himself in accordance with a level that he no longer occupied. For this reason, perhaps, God accepted Hevel’s sacrifice but not Kayin’s.

**Seed-bearing plants**

As noted, it was only after Adam’s sin that non-seed-bearing plants were permitted. In order to understand the difference between plants that yield seed and those that do not, we first need to consider the reason Adam was initially not permitted to eat meat. Just as eating meat involves killing an animal, so too, eating vegetation without seeds means annihilating it. It is only when a plant has the ability to be fruitful and multiply that eating it does not entail destroying it completely.

Now we have a better understanding of the development of the prohibitions on food in *Parashat Bereishit*. When first created, Adam was permitted to eat only plants that yield seed. Following the sin, he fell to a lower level and was permitted to eat any vegetation, like the animals.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**The sin**

In view of the above, we can arrive at a deeper understanding of the Torah’s account of the sin and its punishment. The Torah presents the woman’s sin as follows:

And the woman saw that the tree was good for eating, and that it was desirable to the eyes, and the tree was pleasant to make one wise, and she took of its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate. (*Bereishit* 3:6)

Why does the Torah elaborate at such length on the woman’s sensual perception of the tree? Of course the tree was “good for eating”; had its fruits been bitter or tasteless, there would have been no need to prohibit them!

We can also ask a second question: When God instructs Adam in Chapter 2 not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge, He warns, “For on the day you eat of it, you will surely die” (*Bereishit* 2:17). But we see that although Adam sins and eats of the Tree of Knowledge, God does not cause him to die; He suffices with banishing him from the Garden of Eden![[4]](#footnote-4)

In order to answer these questions, we must pay careful attention to the distinctions between God’s command, the serpent’s words to the woman, and the woman’s response:

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, for on the day you eat of it, you will surely die.” (*Bereishit* 2:16-17)

Now the serpent was more cunning 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 said: ‘You shall not eat of it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.’” (*Bereishit* 3:1-3)

God permits Adam to eat “of every tree of the Garden”; only “the tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil” is prohibited. On the simplest level, this prohibition can be understood in two ways: it may be that the prohibition applied to every part of the tree – the trunk and branches, the fruit, the leaves – or it may be that it was only the tree itself that was prohibited.

The serpent makes effective use of this ambiguity in tempting the woman. He posits that God prohibited only eating of the **tree** of the Garden, while permitting its **fruits**. At first, the woman is not convinced; she replies that God also prohibited eating “**of the fruit** of the tree that is in the midst of the Garden.” But the serpent takes advantage of the ambiguity to press his argument: if Adam is forbidden to eat of the tree itself, then obviously the prohibition applies to the fruits as well. But if the tree itself is “good for eating,” then perhaps God forbade them only to eat of the tree, without prohibiting the fruit. This reasoning succeeds in convincing the woman:

And the woman saw that **the tree** was good for eating, and that it was desirable to the eyes, and the tree was pleasant to make one wise, and she took **of its fruit** and ate… (3:6).

The woman decides that the fruit is permissible, with the assumption that since the tree is good for eating, the prohibition evidently applies specifically to the tree itself, while the fruit may be eaten.

In fact, this reasoning fits well with what we saw above. Just as God only permitted consumption of plants that yield seed, since they possess the power of continuity and renewal, so too, she may have thought, He permits consumption of the **fruit** of the Tree of Knowledge, forbidding only consumption of the tree itself. Eating the fruit does not cause irreparable harm to the tree, while if the tree itself is devoured, then it has no future – and hence it is this that is forbidden.

And indeed, God grants partial acknowledgment to the woman’s “reasoning” and does not immediately put them to death.

**The taste of the tree is like the taste of the fruit**

Perhaps this is the deeper meaning of *Chaza*l’s explanation of the sin of the ground:

Adam, Chava, and the serpent were all brought to judgment, and the ground was cursed along with them, as it is written, “Cursed is the ground on your account…” (3:17).

And why was the ground cursed? … For it transgressed the [Divine] command. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to it, “Let the earth sprout grass (literally, Let the earth grass with grass)…” (1:11) – just as the fruit is edible, so the tree [plant] is edible. But [the ground] did not do so. Instead, “The ground put forth grass…” (1:12) – the fruit was edible, but the tree [plant] was not edible.” (*Bereishit Rabba* 5:9)

Had the ground obeyed the Divine command and sprouted trees whose taste was identical to the taste of their fruit, perhaps the sin could have been avoided. It would have been clear to the woman that the rule that governed the tree also applied to its fruit. But the ground transgressed and brought forth trees that were inedible. That created an opening for the woman to mistakenly believe that a different rule applied to the fruit: since the taste of the Tree of Knowledge and the taste of its fruit were not the same, it seemed possible that only the tree itself was forbidden as food, while the fruits were permissible.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish; edited by Sarah Rudolph)

1. Similarly, in Chapter 2, Man is permitted to eat all fruits that grow on trees (except for the Tree of Knowledge): “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat” (*Bereishit* 2:16). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Admittedly, Man was able to use the skins of carcasses – as Bnei Yisrael did in the wilderness, hundreds of years later. But it is possible that at that time, it was forbidden to make use of animal skins just as it was forbidden to eat their carcasses. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Attention should be paid in this context to the difference between Chapter 1 and Chapter 2. In Chapter 1, Adam may eat plants that yield seed and the fruit of “every tree which contains tree-fruit that yields seed.” In Chapter 2, God permits him to eat “of every tree of the garden”. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. a. It is possible that the punishment is indeed partially fulfilled: Adam is banished from the Garden of Eden, such that he is unable to eat of the Tree of Life and live forever. However, the plain meaning of God’s warning is that the punishment for eating of the Tree of Knowledge would be immediate death, and this is not what happens.

b. Perhaps the punishment meted out to the woman also hints to the originally stated death sentence. It is reasonable to assume that the decree, “In pain shall you bring forth children” (3:16), is not referring to the travail of childbirth – since animals, too, experience painful labor, even though they did not sin. We might suggest instead that childbirth is actually symbolic of death: Man’s way of living on after death is to produce offspring who will survive him. Thus, the birth of children hints to the death of the parents, for it reminds us that since Adam’s sin, Man does not live forever, and thus he must leave progeny in the world. The ritual impurity contracted by a birthing mother may be explained in a similar light: the *Kuzari* (II:60) explains that all forms of ritual impurity are related one way or another to death. Many commentators have struggled to explain the connection between childbirth and death, but in light of the above, the connection is clear: the child’s birth is a reminder of the parents’ mortality. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)