

Meshech Chochmah Parshas Bereishis

Tzelem Elokim

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ.

God said, "Let us make Man in Our image, after Our likeness." (1:16)

Commenting on this pasuk, the Midrash says:¹

With whom was He consulting? R' Ami says, He was consulting with His heart. This may be compared to a king who commissioned an architect to build a palace for him. When he finally saw it, he was displeased. With whom will he be angry? Will it not be with the architect? Thus does the pasuk state² "וַיִּנְחַם ה' כִּי עָשָׂה אֶת הָאָדָם – Hashem regretted having made Man on earth, and He was sad towards His heart."

The Midrash informs us that Hashem's response upon surveying the moral decline of man in the generation of the flood, of "being sad toward His heart," was based on the fact that it was His heart with Whom He originally consulted before creating Man in His likeness.

- Was is the meaning of Hashem "consulting with His heart"?
- Moreover, if He was actually consulting with His *own* heart, why does He use the plural form "Let us make Man"?

The Meshech Chochmah explains. The faculty of "Tzelem Elokim – the Likeness of God" refers to Man's ability to choose based on his own free will, with his decisions not being entirely dictated either by his nature or by Hashem's command. The Name "Elokim" denotes Hashem as the Source of all power. In granting Man the capacity to defy Him, Hashem was essentially "diminishing" His own power, granting a "likeness" of it – "Tzelem Elokim" – to Man. Hence,

¹ Bereishis Rabbah 8:3

² Bereishis 6:6.

Hashem “consulted with His heart,” referring to His infinite power, before endowing Man with this capacity.

Rashi³ informs us that the term “Elokim,” as with all terms that denote power, is typically used in the plural form, even when referring to only one source of that power. Therefore, since the faculty which Hashem was about to bestow upon Man involved granting him some of His own power, so to speak, the plural form is used – “Let us make Man.”

This God-given faculty of free will defines Man, and hence, in the Midrash’s allegory, it is the “architect” that was commissioned to design him. Thus, when Man led himself into a state of total moral decline, the pasuk states that Hashem was “sad toward His heart” – the heart with whom He “consulted” before granting Man this power which he had proceeded to abuse.

The First Mitzvah and the Etz Hada’as

וַיִּצַו ה' אֱלֹקִים עַל הָאָדָם לֵאמֹר מִכָּל עֵץ הַגֶּן אָכַל תֹּאכֵל. וּמֵעֵץ הַדְּעִית טוֹב וְרָע לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ.

Hashem God commanded man, saying, “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, do not eat thereof.”
(2:16-17)

It is possible to sum up the contents of these two pesukim by stating that Hashem told Adam that while he may eat from any of the trees on the garden, one tree – the *Etz Hada’as* – remained forbidden. As such, the first mitzvah ever given to man was a negative one, i.e. a prohibition. However, the Meshech Chochmah states that this is not the case. The first mitzvah was in fact a positive one – to eat

³ Ibid. 20:13 s.v. *ka’asher*.

from all the other trees in the garden, for the words “אָכַל תֹּאכֵל” as stated regarding those trees was also a mitzvah!⁴

The implications of this understanding are twofold.

Firstly, it reflects the idea that benefiting from and enjoying this world is not merely something which is *permitted*; it is a positive expression of Hashem’s will and, as such, *a mitzvah*. This idea is summed up in the statement of the Yerushalmi⁵ that a person will have to give a reckoning in the future for not having partaken of the enjoyments of this world which were permitted to him.

However, there is a further element. One of the properties of *mitzvos* is that they help protect a person from committing *aveiros*. As such, the mitzvah of eating from the other trees in the garden should likewise have protected Adam and Chava from sinning with the *Etz HaDa’as*. Why did this not happen?

The answer to this question will come from considering Chava’s words to the snake:⁶

מִפְרֵי עֵץ הַגֶּן נֹאכַל. וּמִפְרֵי הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר בְּתוֹךְ הַגֶּן אָמַר אֱלֹקִים לֹא תֹאכְלוּ מִמֶּנּוּ וְלֹא תִגְעוּ בּוֹ

*Of the fruit of any tree in the garden we may eat. Of the fruit of the tree which is in the center of the garden **God has said:** “You shall not eat from it nor shall you touch it.”*

We note that Chava does not mention Hashem’s name in connection with eating from the other trees. It is only with reference to not eating from the *Etz HaDa’as* that she prefaces: “אָמַר אֱלֹקִים – God said.”⁷ This means that when Adam informed her regarding eating from the other trees, he neglected to tell her that this was also a mitzvah.

⁴ Rav Copperman in his commentary suggests that in addition to the double expression “אָכַל תֹּאכֵל” which indicates a certain level of insistence, Hashem’s words to Adam are prefaced with the word “וַיִּצַו – He commanded.” This indicates that the entire communication was one of mitzvah, including eating from the other trees.

⁵ Kiddushin 4:12.

⁶ 3:2-3.

⁷ Additionally, Chava only refers to eating from the other trees with the single expression “נֹאכַל,” as opposed to the original expression of “אָכַל תֹּאכֵל” which indicates that this was a mitzvah, as noted above.

The idea that fulfilling a mitzvah protects one from doing an *aveirah* is conditional at the very least on the person knowing that he is in fact doing a mitzvah.⁸ The tragedy in this episode was thus that Chava did not have the necessary knowledge whereby the mitzvah of eating from the other trees could protect her from sinning with the *Etz Hada'as*!

Perhaps we may add that this corrupted understanding of the first mitzvah itself left Chava susceptible to the influence of the snake. His argument was based on the premise that Hashem did not really have their success or wellbeing at heart, for which reason He forbade them to eat from the *Etz HaDa'as*. Given that, in Chava's perception, Hashem's will had been communicated only in terms of what they *may not* do, with all the other trees being merely "permitted", she was prone to believe this argument, for she had never seen that her wellbeing was something of positive interest to Hashem. Had she known that the first expression of Hashem's will as actually for her and Adam to benefit from and enjoy everything else in the garden, she would not have been so easily swayed by the negative portrayal presented by the snake.

⁸ The Meshech Chochmah refers to the Ra'ah (quoted in the Ran, Rosh Hashanah 7b in *dapei haRif*, s.v. *garsinan*) who states that even according to the opinion that one can fulfill a mitzvah without the intents to do so (מצוות אין) (צריכות כונה), nevertheless, if one has no knowledge that he is even doing a mitzvah, e.g. he eats matzah on Seder night thinking that it is a normal weekday, according to all opinions he has not fulfilled the mitzvah.