

Perspectives on the Tree of Knowledge

Source 1: Bereishit Ch. 2

טז וַיִּצַו יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים, עַל-
הָאָדָם לֵאמֹר: מִכָּל עֵץ-הַגָּן,
אֲכַל תֹּאכַל. 16 And the LORD God commanded the
man, saying: 'Of every tree of the garden
thou mayest freely eat;

יז וּמֵעֵץ, הַדַּעַת טוֹב וְרָע--
לֹא תֹאכַל, מִמֶּנּוּ: כִּי, בְּיוֹם
אֲכָלְךָ מִמֶּנּוּ--מוֹת תָּמוּת.
17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good
and evil, thou shalt not eat of it; for in the
day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt
surely die.'

Source 2: Bereishit Ch. 3

ט וַיִּקְרָא יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים, אֶל-הָאָדָם;
וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ, אַיְכָּה. 9 And the LORD God called unto the man, and
said unto him: 'Where art thou?'

י וַיֹּאמֶר, אֶת-קוֹלְךָ שָׁמַעְתִּי בַגָּן;
וָאִירָא כִּי-עִירַם אֲנֹכִי, וָאֲחָבֵא.
10 And he said: 'I heard Thy voice in the garden,
and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid
myself.'

יא וַיֹּאמֶר--מִי הִגִּיד לְךָ,
כִּי עִירַם אֶתְּהָ; הֲמִן-הָעֵץ,
אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִיךָ לִבְלֹתָ
אֲכַל-מִמֶּנּוּ--אֲכָלְתָּ. 11 And He said: 'Who told thee that thou wast
naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I
commanded thee that thou shouldst not eat?'

יב וַיֹּאמֶר, הָאָדָם: הָאִשָּׁה
אֲשֶׁר נָתַתָּה עִמָּדִי,
הִיא נָתַתָּה-לִּי מִן-הָעֵץ
וָאֲכַל. 12 And the man said: 'The woman whom Thou
gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree,
and I did eat.'

יג וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים לְאִשָּׁה,
מַה-זֶּאת עָשִׂית; וַתֹּאמֶר,
הָאִשָּׁה, הִנְחָשׁ
הַשִּׂיאָנִי, וָאֲכַל. 13 And the LORD God said unto the woman:
'What is this thou hast done?' And the woman
said: 'The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat.'

Source 3: Rambam Guide of the Perplexed (I, 2)

Some years ago a wise man asked me an important question; both the question and our answer deserve close examination... Said the questioner: the plain meaning of the text would seem to indicate that [God's] original intention had been that man should be like the rest of the animals, which have no intellect or reason or distinction between good and evil, and that it was Adam's disobedience that brought him that great perfection that is unique to humanity, i.e., possession of that consciousness which we have [of good and evil], which is the noblest of all human faculties, and the essential characteristic of human beings. It is baffling that the punishment for his rebellion should raise him to a pinnacle of perfection – intellect – which he had not previously attained. This is tantamount to asserting that a certain person was rebellious and exceedingly sinful, and therefore his nature was changed for the better, and he was made to shine as a star in the heavens.

Eating Manna vs. eating of the Tree of Knowledge

Source 4: Bereishit 1:29

כט וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים, הִנֵּה נָתַתִּי לָכֶם אֶת-כָּל-עֵשֶׂב זֶרַע זֶרַע אֲשֶׁר עַל-פְּנֵי כָל-הָאָרֶץ, וְאֶת-כָּל-הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר-בּוֹ פְּרִי-עֵץ, זֶרַע זֶרַע: לָכֶם יְהִי, לְאֹכֶלָה. 29 And God said: 'Behold, I have given you every herb yielding seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed--to you it shall be for food;

Source 5: Bereishit 2:16

טז וַיִּצַו יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים, עַל-הָאָדָם לֵאמֹר: מִכָּל עֵץ-הַגֶּן, אָכַל תֹּאכֵל. 16 And the LORD God commanded the man, saying: 'Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat;

In the story of the manna, we read:

Source 6: Shemot Ch. 16

טו וַיִּרְאוּ בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל-אָחִיו מִן הוּא--כִּי לֹא יָדְעוּ, מַה-הוּא; וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה, אֲלֵהֶם, הוּא הַלֶּחֶם, אֲשֶׁר נָתַן יְהוָה לָכֶם לֶאֱכֹלָהּ.

15 And when the children of Israel saw it, they said one to another: 'What is it?'--for they knew not what it was. And Moses said unto them: 'It is the bread which the LORD hath given you to eat.'

טז זֶה הַדָּבָר, אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה, לְקַטֹּף מִמֶּנּוּ, אִישׁ לְפִי אֲכָלוֹ: עֹמֶר לַגִּלְגֹּלֶת, מִסְפַּר נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם--אִישׁ לֶאֱשֶׁר בְּאֹהֶלוֹ, תִקְחוּ.

16 This is the thing which the LORD hath commanded: Gather ye of it every man according to his eating; an omer a head, according to the number of your persons, shall ye take it, every man for them that are in his tent.'

Rav Gad Eldad:

The two situations are in fact the inverse of one another. The manna is the only food available to the people during their wanderings in the desert; it is produced by God especially for these conditions, it comes with specific instructions, and it has a specific purpose.

The picture arising in relation to the Tree of Knowledge is the opposite: Adam is commanded to enjoy the goodness of all the trees of the garden; only one single, specific food is forbidden to him: See Bereishit 2:17 (above)

Source 7: Shemot Ch. 16

יד וַתֵּעַל, שְׁכַבֶּת הַטֶּל; וַהֲנִה עַל-פְּנֵי הַמִּדְבָּר, דֶּק מְחֹסֶפֶס--דֶּק כְּכַפֹּר, עַל-הָאָרֶץ.

14 And when the layer of dew was gone up, behold upon the face of the wilderness a fine, scale-like thing, fine as the hoar-frost on the ground.

טו וַיִּרְאוּ בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל-אָחִיו מִן הוּא--כִּי לֹא יָדְעוּ, מַה-

15 And when the children of Israel saw it, they said one to another: 'What is it?'--for they knew

הוא ; ויאמר משה, אלהים, הוא not what it was. And Moses said unto them: 'It is
הלחם, אשר נתן יהוה לכם לאכלה. the bread which the LORD hath given you to eat.

The motif of not knowing in the context of the manna appears again Devarim 8:3:

Source 8: Devarim Ch. 8

ב וזכרת את-כל-הדרך, אשר הולכתך
יהוה אלהיך זה ארבעים שנה--
במדבר: למען ענתך לנסתך, לדעת
את-אשר בלבבך התשמר מצותו--
אם-לא.

2 And thou shalt remember all the way which the LORD thy
God hath led thee these forty years in the wilderness, that He
might afflict thee, to prove thee, to know what was in thy
heart, whether thou wouldest keep His commandments, or no.

ג ויענך, וירעבך, ויאכלך את-המן
אשר לא-ידעת, ולא ידעו
אבתים: למען הודיעך, כי לא על-
הלחם לבדו יחיה האדם--כי על-
כל-מוצא פי-יהוה, יחיה האדם.

3 And He afflicted thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed
thee with manna, which thou knewest not, neither did thy
fathers know; that He might make thee know that man doth
not live by bread only, but by every thing that proceedeth out
of the mouth of the LORD doth man live.

Source 9: Bereishit Ch. 3

ד ויאמר הנחש, אל-האשה: לא-
מות, תמתין.
4 And the serpent said unto the woman: 'Ye
shall not surely die;

ה כי, ידע אלהים, כי ביום אכלכם
ממנו, ונפקחו עיניכם; והייתם,
כאלהים, ידעו, טוב ורע.
5 for God doth know that in the day ye eat
thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and
ye shall be as God, knowing good and evil.'

Rav Eldad: The Israelites confront manna; the text emphasizes their lack of knowledge or familiarity with it, and in this situation they are commanded to eat it. In the Garden of Eden, Adam knows about the Tree of Knowledge, but he is forbidden to eat from it, and thus the path to knowledge is blocked.

Source 10: The Failure of the Test in both stories: Bereishit Ch. 3

ו וַתֵּרָא הָאִשָּׁה כִּי טוֹב הָעֵץ
 לְמַאֲכָל וְכִי תֵאֵוָה-הוּא לְעֵינַיִם,
 וְנִחְמַד הָעֵץ לְהַשְׂכִּיל, וַתִּקַּח
 מִפְּרִיו, וַתֹּאכַל; וַתִּתֵּן גַּם-לְאִישָׁהּ
 עִמָּהּ, וַיֹּאכַל. 6 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, she took of the fruit
 thereof, and did eat; and she gave also unto
 her husband with her, and he did eat.

Source 11: Shemot Ch. 16

יט וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה, אֲלֵהֶם: אִישׁ,
 אֶל-יֹתֵר מִמֶּנּוּ עַד-בֹּקֶר. 19 And Moses said unto them: 'Let no man
 leave of it till the morning.'
 כ וְלֹא-שָׁמְעוּ אֶל-מֹשֶׁה, וַיֹּתְרוּ
 אֲנָשִׁים מִמֶּנּוּ עַד-בֹּקֶר, וַיָּרַח
 תוֹלְעִים, וַיִּבָּאֵשׁ; וַיִּקְצַף עֲלֵהֶם,
 מֹשֶׁה. 20 Notwithstanding they hearkened not unto
 Moses; but some of them left of it until the
 morning, and it bred worms, and rotted; and
 Moses was wroth with them.

Summary:

1. The fruit of the Tree of Knowledge is located in the midst of a garden that is filled with every tree which is pleasing to the eye and desirable to the palate, all available to man; this fruit is the only one that they are commanded not to eat. The manna descends in the wilderness, a place of desolation; this is the only available food, and there is a command as to the manner in which it is to be consumed.
2. Man confronts both the Tree of Knowledge and the manna from within a state of not knowing. He is commanded to eat of the manna, which will give him insight and expand his knowledge, while his path to knowledge via the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge is blocked.

Source 12: Shemot Ch. 16

ד וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה,
 הִנְנִי מַמְטִיר לָכֶם לֶחֶם מִן-
 הַשָּׁמַיִם; וַיֵּצֵא הָעָם וַלְקִטּוֹ 4 Then said the LORD unto Moses: 'Behold,
 I will cause to rain bread from heaven for
 you; and the people shall go out and
 gather a day's portion every day, that I

דְּבַר-יוֹם בְּיוֹמוֹ, לְמַעַן אֲנִסְנוּ הֵילֵךְ בְּתוֹרָתִי אִם-לֹא. may prove them, whether they will walk in My law, or not.

כז וַיְהִי בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי, יֵצְאוּ מִן-הָעָם לְלֶקֶט; וְלֹא, מִצָּאוּ. {ס} 27 And it came to pass on the seventh day, that there went out some of the people to gather, and they found none. {S}

כח וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה, אֶל-מֹשֶׁה: עַד-אָנָּה, מֵאַנְתֶּם, לִשְׁמֹר מִצְוֹתַי, וְתוֹרָתִי. 28 And the LORD said unto Moses: 'How long refuse ye to keep My commandments and My laws?

Source 13: Shemot Ch. 12

ג דַּבְּרוּ, אֶל-כָּל-עֵדֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר, בְּעֶשֶׂר, לַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה: וַיִּקְחוּ לָהֶם, אִישׁ שֶׁה לְבֵית-אָבֹת--שֶׁה לְבֵית. 3 Speak ye unto all the congregation of Israel, saying: In the tenth day of this month they shall take to them every man a lamb, according to their fathers' houses, a lamb for a household;

ד וְאִם-יִמְעַט הַבַּיִת, מִהְיוֹת מֹשֶׁה--וְלָקַח הוּא וְשִׁכְנוֹ הַקָּרֹב אֶל-בֵּיתוֹ, בְּמִכְסֹת נַפְשֹׁת: אִישׁ לְפִי אֹכְלוֹ, תַכְסֹּו עַל-הַשֶּׁה. 4 and if the household be too little for a lamb, then shall he and his neighbour next unto his house take one according to the number of the souls; according to every man's eating ye shall make your count for the lamb.

י וְלֹא-תוֹתִירוּ מִמֶּנּוּ, עַד-בֹּקֶר; וְהִנְתַּר מִמֶּנּוּ עַד-בֹּקֶר, בָּאֵשׁ תִּשְׂרְפוּ. 10 And ye shall let nothing of it remain until the morning; but that which remaineth of it until the morning ye shall burn with fire.

יא וְכָכָה, תֹּאכְלוּ אֹתוֹ--מִתְגִּידֵיכֶם חֲגָרִים, נַעֲלֵיכֶם בְּרֶגְלֵיכֶם וּמַקְלֵכֶם בְּיָדְכֶם; וְאָכַלְתֶּם אֹתוֹ בְּחִפְזוֹן, פָּסַח הוּא לַיהוָה. 11 And thus shall ye eat it: with your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and ye shall eat it in haste--it is the LORD'S passover.

Source 14: Shemot Ch. 16

טז זֶה הַדָּבָר, אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה, לְקַטֹּף מִמֶּנּוּ, אִישׁ לְפִי אֲכָלוֹ: עֹמֶר לְגִלְגֶלֶת, מִסֵּפֶר נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם--אִישׁ לְאִשֶׁר בְּאֹהֶלוֹ, תִקְחוּ. 16 This is the thing which the LORD hath commanded: Gather ye of it every man according to his eating; an omer a head, according to the number of your persons, shall ye take it, every man for them that are in his tent.'

כא וַיִּלְקְטוּ אֹתוֹ בַּבֹּקֶר בַּבֹּקֶר, אִישׁ כְּפִי אֲכָלוֹ; וְחֶם הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ, וְנָמַס. 21 And they gathered it morning by morning, every man according to his eating; and as the sun waxed hot, it melted

Rav Eldad: This echo of the *pesach* would seem to indicate an attempt to inculcate in the people a consciousness of the temporary aspect of eating the manna, whose rules recall those of the *pesach* in Egypt. The journey through the wilderness was meant to be a brief, transient experience; after receiving the Torah, the nation was meant to head directly to Kena'an. Only at the end of this unit does the Torah expose the bitter reality (v. 35): "And the Israelites ate the manna for forty years, until they came to inhabited land; they ate the manna until they came to the borders of the land of Kena'an."

Source 15: Devarim Ch. 19

א וַיִּקְרָא מֹשֶׁה אֶל-כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל, וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם: אַתֶּם רְאִיתֶם, אֶת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה יְהוָה לְעֵינֵיכֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, לְפָרְעָה וּלְכָל-עַבְדָּיו, וּלְכָל-אֶרְצוֹ. 1 And Moses called unto all Israel, and said unto them: Ye have seen all that the LORD did before your eyes in the land of Egypt unto Pharaoh, and unto all his servants, and unto all his land;

ב הַמַּסּוֹת, הַגְּדֹלוֹת, אֲשֶׁר רָאוּ, עֵינֵיךָ--הָאֵתוֹת וְהַמִּפְתִּים הַגְּדֹלִים, הֵהֵם. 2 the great trials which thine eyes saw, the signs and those great wonders;

ג וְלֹא־נָתַן יְהוָה לְכֶם לֵב לְדַעַת, וְעֵינַיִם לְרֹאוֹת וְאָזְנִים לְשָׁמַע, עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה. 3 but the LORD hath not given you a heart to know, and eyes to see, and ears to hear, unto this day.

ד וְאוֹלַךְ אֶתְכֶם אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה, בְּמִדְבָּר; לֹא־בָלוּ שְׁלֹמֹתֵיכֶם מֵעַלְיֶיכֶם, וְנַעֲלָךְ לֹא־בָלְתָה מֵעַל רַגְלֶךָ. 4 And I have led you forty years in the wilderness; your clothes are not waxen old upon you, and thy shoe is not waxen old upon thy foot.

ה לֶחֶם לֹא אָכַלְתֶּם, וַיַּיֵּן וְשָׁכַר לֹא שָׁתִיתֶם-- לְמַעַן תֵּדָעוּ, כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה, אֱלֹהֵיכֶם. 5 Ye have not eaten bread, neither have ye drunk wine or strong drink; that ye might know that I am the LORD your God.

Over the course of the journey, it becomes apparent that there is a direct connection between the two areas. As the people continue to consume the manna that God rains down for them, so they progress in their consciousness and knowledge of God. We might extend this idea of the direct relationship to the Torah itself. The Revelation at Sinai was a one-time event; at the end of the forty days, Moshe descended with the Tablets of the Covenant. Over the course of the journey through the desert, additional commandments were gradually added. The writing of the Torah was completed only at the end of the forty years (Devarim 31:24). Thus, the people journeyed through the desert, nourished by manna from heaven and, concurrently, learning the laws from heaven.

Source 16: from his article: Rav Gad Eldad's Conclusion:

“Oh, that My people would obey Me”

We propose that the Torah offers an alternative to or substitute for the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, in the form of the manna. The chosen people is commanded explicitly to eat food that descends from heaven – a food that helps to expand their knowledge, their understanding of the way in which God guides the world, and their consciousness of His Sovereignty. This serves to make it clear that God never sought to withhold good from man, nor did He ever want man to be ignorant. God had always

sought to imbue humanity with knowledge – but they did not wait to receive it, but rather acted impudently and seized it on their own; for this, they were punished. Later on in history, it was clear to all that God Himself was acting to inculcate and imbue knowledge in humanity, as a sign of His love and closeness – not as the result of a misstep, but rather as an intentional act. God fed man with His goodness – with a unique food that nourished their body while at the same time giving them knowledge of good and evil, instructing them as to the manner in which it should be eaten, such that people came to have knowledge of their Maker and some consciousness of the way in which He manages the world.

Now, we must ask, why did God not give man this knowledge through the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge? Why did He prefer to inculcate knowledge through the eating of the manna?

Before answering this question, it is important that we note a difference between the way in which knowledge is acquired through eating of the fruit of the Tree and the way in which it is acquired through eating the manna. By eating the fruit of the Tree man acquires knowledge directly: through the very act of eating, their eyes are opened. The eating of the manna, in contrast, does not in itself bring knowledge. Rather, the eating is the basis of a lifestyle which imbues those who embrace it with knowledge.

Let us consider the ramifications of this distinction.

Knowing good and evil

In the story of the early generations of man, we encounter the following description:

And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born to them, that the distinguished men (*bnei ha-elohim*; literally: sons of God) saw that the daughters of men were fair (*toivot*; literally: good), and they took them wives of all whom they chose.

And God said: “My spirit shall not always strive on account of man, for that he also is flesh, and his days shall be a hundred and twenty years.”

There were Nephilim in the earth in those days, and also after that, when the distinguished men came in to the daughters of men, and they bore children to them; these were mighty men of old, men of renown.

And God saw that the wickedness of (*ra'á*) man was great in the earth, and that all the impulse of the thoughts of his heart were only evil (*ra*) continually. And God repented that He had made man on the earth, and it grieved Him at His heart. (*Bereishit* 6:1-6)

This unit describes the consolidation of God's decision to destroy His creation. The description includes expressions that harken back to the story of the Tree of Knowledge. Men are depicted here as "sons of God" and mention is made of the concepts of good and evil. The unit seems to allude to eating from the Tree of Knowledge, as described by the serpent in its efforts to persuade the woman:

And the serpent said to the woman: "You shall not surely die, for God knows that on the day you eat of it, then your eyes shall be opened, and you shall be as God, knowing good and evil." (*Bereishit* 3:4-5)

The Torah seems to be connecting the two units in a cause-and-effect relationship. Paradoxically, we see that it is specifically the fact that man is a son of God, knowing good and evil, that brings about its fall, to the point where God regrets having created it.

"To know wisdom and instruction; to perceive the words of understanding"

The Torah contrasts two mechanism of the human acquisition of knowledge, as well as two types of knowledge. Knowledge may be acquired as a neutral item for consumption, in accordance with a mathematical formula of cause and effect. A person who works to acquire knowledge will amass it automatically, as a result of their efforts, in the same manner in which a person who eats food when hungry will be satiated by it as a result of automatic physiological processes. Acquisition of knowledge in this manner does not entail any further demands on the consumer: all one needs to do is to concentrate on and delve into the details of what they are learning. Once they acquire it, they are entitled to use their knowledge as they see fit.

A different manner of acquiring knowledge is represented by the eating of the manna. This is not a detached act of consumption that stands alone. Rather, it is a meaningful

eating that balances life forces in a prescribed way. In this manner, knowledge is not acquired as a mechanical, automatic result, as a product in and of itself; rather, it is part of a broader way of life and moral teaching.

The gap between these two types of eating teaches us that knowledge is not merely a neutral item of consumption that comes to satisfy an intellectual desire. It must be acquired on a moral platform, with an understanding of its place in the life of the human race, with all its risks and opportunities.

Now we can answer the question presented by Rambam. Man did not benefit from eating of the forbidden fruit. The knowledge that he acquired did not help him to develop and advance his world; rather, it led to confusion of the concepts of good and evil to a point where his continued existence was threatened. Knowledge in and of itself is full of formulas and laws of nature, with no limitations of ethics or morality. Symbolically, its very acquisition is accompanied by an act that violates the ethical charge of the Creator, merely for the sake of satisfying the desire for knowledge. Such knowledge, unrestricted by an ethical framework that weighs its consequences, may bring about the annihilation of mankind. The ideal knowledge that God wants for man is not that of Bilam, “who knows the knowledge of the Most High” but gives immoral and licentious counsel. God wants man to acquire knowledge once the moral imperative is firmly ingrained in him. Such knowledge is not neutral and colorless; rather, the good is colored by a positive command, while evil is colored by a negative command.

The Generation of the Wilderness merited to receive knowledge in this manner, in generous quantities.

Behold, I have set before you this day life and good, and death and evil; in that I command you this day to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments. Then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God shall bless you in the land into which you go to possess it... I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your seed may live. (*Devarim* 30:15-19)