

The Tree of Knowledge

Introduction

A Puzzling Prohibition

Man receives his first prohibition midway through the second chapter of Sefer Bereshit:

(טז) וַיֵּצֵא יי' אֶל־הָאָדָם עַל הָאֲדָם לֵאמֹר מִכָּל עֵץ הָגֶן אָכַל תֹּאכֵל.
 (יז) וּמִעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וָרָע לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ כִּי בְיוֹם אֲכָלְךָ מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת תָּמוּת.

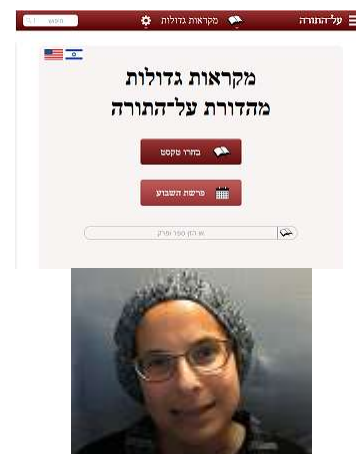
(16) And the Lord God commanded the man, saying: 'Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat; (17) but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it; for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.'

On one hand, the directive is quite simple: Adam is prohibited from eating from a certain tree, and he is warned that doing so will bring about his death. Yet, this short command hides more than it reveals and has perplexed readers throughout the centuries:

- **"עץ הדעת טוב ורע"** – What is the nature of the knowledge granted by this "עץ הדעת טוב ורע" ("Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad")? What do the terms "טוב ורע" mean?
- **Is knowledge negative?** – Why did Hashem prohibit humans from attaining this knowledge? Is not intellectual growth a positive development? Or, as Rambam poses the question: Is it possible that human intellect, the perfection of mankind, came about only due to sin?
- **Man's knowledge prior to the sin** – What was man's intellectual state before eating from the Tree? If he was not able to distinguish good from bad, and had no faculties of perception, how could he have been expected to abide by Hashem's command? Moreover, how could he be held accountable when he transgressed?
- **The ideal** – What does the prohibition suggest about Hashem's original plan for mankind and what He considered man's idyllic state?
- **Why make the Tree?** A final question relates to the very existence of the Tree. If Hashem did not want man to eat from it, why did He create it in the first place?

Life and Death

Alongside the עץ הדעת (Tree of Knowledge), a second special tree was found in the garden, the עץ החיים (Tree of Life). What does this name connote? Did this tree grant immortality, rejuvenate a person, or cure illness? How did the two trees relate to each other? Man was told that eating from the former would lead to death, while eating from the latter, presumably, extended life. At the beginning of the narrative, only the former is explicitly prohibited, yet after the sin, Hashem banishes Adam from Gan Eden, "lest he take also from the Tree of Life". Does this suggest that it, too, had originally been off-limits and God was fearful that



man would once again be disobedient? Or, was the Tree initially permitted and only banned as a consequence of sin? If so, was man originally meant to live forever? Was part of his punishment that this was no longer to be the case, or did Hashem have a different motive in guarding the way to the Tree of Life?

Measure for Measure Punishment?

In Bereshit 3:14-19, each of the participants in the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge is directly punished by God. The snake is cursed to crawl on his belly and eat dust, and is also told that enmity will endure between him and mankind. Chavvah is punished that she is to bear children in much pain and sorrow and that she is to be ruled by her husband. Finally, Adam is informed that the land is to be cursed before him and that until his death he will need to produce food through the sweat of his brow. How does each punishment fit the crime? Are they measure for measure responses to the specific deeds of each individual? If so, what light might the various punishments shed on the nature of the sin? Finally, is it possible that the curses given to Adam and Chavvah are not punishments at all, but merely the natural consequences of eating from the Tree?

Additional Questions

The story raises several other questions which directly relate to the points above:

- **"בְּיוֹם אֲכָלְךָ מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת תָּמוּת"** – Adam is told that on the day he eats from the tree he will die, yet Adam lives for centuries after the sin. How can this be explained? In addition, how does this declaration relate to Adam's later punishment that he is eventually to return to dust: **"כִּי עָפָר אַתָּה וְאֶל עָפָר תָּשׁוּב"**?
- **"וְהָיִיתָ כְּאֱלֹהִים יָדְעִי טוֹב וָרָע"** – The snake tells Chavvah that, upon eating from the Tree, she will "become like God". Hashem Himself similarly declares, **"הֵן הָאָדָם הָיָה כְּאֶחָד מִמֶּנּוּ לְדַעַת טוֹב וָרָע"**. These statements suggest that the knowledge granted by the Tree somehow made man godlike. If so, the questions raised above are strengthened; why prevent man from attaining a godly trait?
- **"וַיִּדְעוּ כִּי עֲרֻמִּם הֵם"** – The first knowledge of which Adam and Chavvah gain awareness is their nakedness. This is not the only reference to nakedness in the story; in fact, a focus is trained on it throughout the unit (see 2:25, 3:7, 3:10, 3:11, and 3:22). What does this suggest regarding the knowledge attained by eating from the Tree? Why is this element so central to the narrative?
- **"וַיִּקְרָא הָאָדָם שֵׁם אִשְׁתּוֹ חַוְּוָה"** – While in 2:23, Adam names his spouse **"אִשָּׁה"** (lit. woman), towards the end of Chapter 3, Adam renames her "Chavvah". Why is she renamed specifically at this point? What is the significance of the new name? How, if at all, does it relate to the sin?

The Tree of Knowledge

Exegetical Approaches

This topic is still being developed and updated

Overview

In trying to understand the nature of the knowledge bestowed by "עץ הדעת טוב ורע", commentators are motivated by both their understanding of the text and their vision of mankind and what constitutes Paradise. Ibn Ezra puts textual consideration at the forefront, concluding from context and other usages of the root "ידע", that here it refers not to knowledge but to sexual desire. His approach makes one question whether procreation had been part of the original plan for mankind, and what life would be like if it were not colored by sensual desire.

For others, the philosophical question of what constitutes the ideal human might have been equally influential. Thus, rationalists such as Rambam and Ralbag, who view the intellect as the crowning glory of man, deem it impossible for man to have been created without wisdom. As such, they assert that eating from the Tree diminished, rather than boosted, the intellectual capacity of man. Cassuto, in contrast, suggests that childlike ignorance can be blissful, and that eating from the Tree bestowed knowledge, and with it, worry, pain, and fear. Ramban presents a third portrait of the ideal human: an angel-like being who has no free will and no evil impulse to sway him. The Tree introduced choice, and with it, the evil inclination.

A final approach suggests that the fruit of the Tree did not impact on man's nature at all. It was placed in the Garden to test man's obedience. Would he listen to the dictates of his senses in order to determine what was "good and bad", or would he recognize that such terms are defined by Hashem's command alone?

Sexual Desire

The fruit of the Tree introduced sexual desire to mankind.

SOURCES: Ibn Ezra, Radak, Abarbanel

Meaning of the root "דעת" – These sources point to the many places in Tanakh where the root דע' connotes sexual relations¹ to suggest that here, too, the knowledge gained by the Tree was sexual in nature, i.e. Adam and Chavvah gained sexual desire. A variation of this approach could suggest that the Tree introduced the mating instinct, and that, until the sin, Adam and Chavvah were not meant to have sexual relations at all.²

Meaning of "טוב ורע" – Abarbanel claims that the "good and bad" refers to the fact that a proper amount of sexual desire can be positive,³ but when the desire becomes excessive it is harmful.⁴

Intellectual knowledge prior to sin – All these sources maintain that man had intellectual knowledge before the sin and that he already knew how to differentiate between good or bad. If not, they claim, what

sense would it have made for Hashem to prohibit or permit him to eat from different trees, and how could he be held accountable had he disobeyed?

"וַיֵּדְעוּ כִּי עֲרֻמָּם הֵם..." – Ibn Ezra and Radak point to this verse as proof for this position. After eating from the Tree, the first thing that Adam and Chavvah gained awareness of was the fact of their nakedness.⁵ Only with sexual desire did nakedness take on any import and lead to a feeling of embarrassment.⁶

"וְהָאָדָם יָדַע אֶת חוּה אִשְׁתּוֹ" – Immediately following our story, Adam has relations with his wife, a direct result of the new knowledge which he gained.

"וְהָיִיתֶם כְּאֱלֹהִים יֹדְעֵי טוֹב וָרָע" – Ramban questions this approach from the fact that both the snake and Hashem⁷ declared that in eating from the Tree, man would become / became similar to God. Since Hashem does not have sexual desire, it would seem difficult to define the knowledge gained by the fruit in such a manner. Commentators address this in two ways:

- Abarbanel responds that these verses refer to Hashem's role as Creator.⁸ Sexual desire leads to procreation, and in this regard, man is similar to Hashem who brings life to all.⁹
- Ibn Ezra and Radak maintain that in these verses the word "אלהים" does not refer to Hashem, but to angels. Though one might claim that angels, too, have no sexual desire, the story of the "בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים" coupling with "בָּנוֹת הָאָדָם" might suggest otherwise.¹⁰ [See בני האלהים and בנות האדם for various readings of the story.]

Eating from the Tree of Life – Abarbanel claims that man was originally allowed to eat from the Tree of Life and was meant to live forever.¹¹ Ibn Ezra and Radak, in contrast, view the Tree as extending life or having life-inducing properties, but not as granting immortality.¹²

"כִּי בַיּוֹם אָכַלְךָ מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת תָּמוּת"

- **Early death** – Ibn Ezra claims that the verse should be read according to its simple sense, that originally man was supposed to die the same day that he ate from the Tree. Only due to his repentance was the punishment averted.¹³ Radak similarly suggests that an early (but not an immediate) death was decreed upon him.¹⁴
- **Mortality** – According to Abarbanel, in contrast, Hashem warned Adam that upon his eating from the Tree, mortality would be decreed upon mankind. He, however, views this as a direct consequence of the sin rather than a punishment.¹⁵

"וַיִּקְרָא הָאָדָם שֵׁם אִשְׁתּוֹ חוּה" – These sources suggest that the naming of Chavvah, which appears to interrupt the story, is actually integrally related to the sin.

- According to Radak, it was only now, with the introduction of sexual desire, that Adam and Chavvah realized that they were to procreate and that Chavvah was to become "אִם קָלָהּ".¹⁶ It is possible to go further and suggest that, until the sin, mankind was not meant to procreate at all, but was instead to eat from the Tree of Life and live forever.¹⁷
- Abarbanel explicitly disagrees and claims that Adam and Chavvah were always meant to cohabit and bear children regardless of the sin.¹⁸ He suggests, instead, that the name Chavvah relates to her garrulous nature which led her to sin. "חוה" means to tell or declare as in Tehillim 19:3, "וַיִּחַזַּק דְּבָרָה".

Measure for measure punishment? Chavvah's punishment of pain in childbirth and always desiring her husband corresponds to a sin related to sexual desire.¹⁹ In fact, it could even be seen as a direct

consequence of her deed rather than simply a punishment (especially if the two were not meant to procreate beforehand).

Why make the Tree at all? Abarbanel explains that the Tree had positive properties as well as negative ones. Seeing and touching it provided the proper amount of sexual desire, and had Adam and Chavvah not eaten from the Tree, they would have enjoyed its benefits without its negatives.

The original plan for mankind

- According to the position that procreation was first introduced after the sin, it seems that the world was originally meant to have been inhabited only by Adam and Chavvah. It is not clear, though, what would have been the purpose of such a world.
- According to those who suggest that mankind was always meant to procreate, the ideal world was one in which such procreation was more utilitarian in nature and not colored by excessive desire.

Uniqueness of human sexual behavior – Along these lines, A. Korman²⁰ suggests that originally man's sexual drive might have been more similar to that of animals, and the uniqueness of human sexual conduct might be an outgrowth of the sin:

- In many animal species, it is smell (pheromones) rather than sight which stimulates the sexual drive. Thus, it was only after the sin that *seeing* another's nakedness was felt as shameful.
- Most animals mate only for purposes of reproduction.²¹ Similarly, very few species outside of humans menstruate or experience menopause. Thus, humans are somewhat unique in having many years during which they can be sexually active, yet not be able to procreate, introducing the concept of mating for pleasure.



Free Will and/or the Evil Inclination

Upon eating from the Tree, humans acquired an inclination to do evil (יצר הרע), thereby giving them the free will to choose between good and bad.

SOURCES: Rashi,²² R. Yosef Bekhor Shor,²³ Ramban, R. Y"S Reggio²⁴

Meaning of "עץ הדעת טוב ורע" – Ramban claims that "דעת" refers to will or choice, pointing to the phrases "וְדַעְתִּיךָ בְּשֵׁם" in Shemot 33:12 and "מִה אָדָם וְיִדְעָהּ" in Tehillim 144:3 as evidence. The Tree granted man free will to choose between something and its opposite, for positive or negative.

"וְהָיִיתֶם כְּאֱלֹהִים יֹדְעֵי טוֹב וָרָע" – Hashem's words are understood according to their simple sense: the ability to choose between good and evil is a Divine trait.

Sin rewarded? This approach must explain why free will would have been granted to man only in the aftermath of his sin.

- Ramban responds that free choice comes with the inclination to do evil, as man is guided not only by what is right, but by passions and desire. This allows one to choose poorly. According to Ramban, it would have been better for man to have no choices and to always do what is correct.²⁵
- Rashi and R. Y"S Reggio go further to suggest that the knowledge granted by the Tree was the evil inclination itself.²⁶

"...וַיִּדְעוּ כִּי עִרְמוֹם הֵם..." – With the introduction of free will and the accompanying evil inclination, the sexual act took on a different aspect. It was no longer a utilitarian deed, performed matter-of-factly for the purposes of procreation, but one filled with desire. Therefore, upon eating from the Tree, Adam and Chavvah were embarrassed by their nakedness.²⁷

Commands to someone lacking free will? Ramban's approach is difficult on several grounds:

- Abarbanel questions, if man had no free will, what was the point of Hashem's prohibition? After all, Adam did not have the choice to either listen or disobey! Moreover, without any inclination to do wrong, how could he have sinned at all?²⁸
- In addition, Chavvah appears to evaluate the various aspects of the Tree²⁹ before deciding to eat from it, suggesting that she already had the ability to differentiate between good and bad and choose accordingly.
- Finally, if man had no choice, why should he have been punished?

R. Y"S Reggio explains that sometimes man sins, not due to desire stemming from the evil impulse,³⁰ but due to mistaken logic. Chavvah was swayed by the snake to believe that Hashem truly wanted to keep perfection away from humans, leading her to eat. This explanation, however, would not suffice for Ramban who has man lacking not just an evil inclination but free will altogether.

Variation of the approach – Given the above questions, a variation of this position might suggest that though man always had free will (and therefore he could be commanded regarding the Tree), before the sin, his evil inclination was very weak. Eating from the Tree strengthened that impulse, giving him more freedom of choice, but also making him more likely to sin.³¹ [This might be closer to the interpretations of Rashi, R"Y Bekhor Shor, and R. Y"S Reggio.]

"כִּי בְיוֹם אֶכְלֶךָ מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת תָּמוּת" – Ramban³² asserts that originally man was meant to live forever, but that eating from the Tree introduced mortality.

- **Consequence of banishment** – Ramban suggests that perhaps this is the consequence of Hashem's curse which forced man to eat from the grass of the field and not from the trees of the Garden. The latter likely had life-preserving qualities lacking in the produce Adam was to grow for himself.
- **Safeguard from sin** – R"Y Bekhor Shor, instead, suggests that mortality was now needed to safeguard mankind. Fear of death would help rein in the evil impulse and control man's appetite for evil. He reads Adam's punishment that he toil similarly; hard labor reduces the inclination to sin (גייעה) (משכחת עון).
- **Accountable for crimes** – A Northern French commentary suggests that if man had not sinned, he would have been immortal since a person who can not distinguish between good and bad cannot be held accountable for his crimes. Once he gained such knowledge, though, capital punishment became possible.

Chavvah's punishment

- **Measure for measure** – If humans gained free will by eating from the Tree, Chavvah's punishment that her husband will rule over her (which would, in effect, mitigate her free will) might be viewed as a measure for measure response.³³
- **Consequence of sin** – R"Y Bekhor Shor explains that since the sin created the need for mortality, it also introduced the need for procreation to ensure the survival of the species. Thus, Chavvah was told

that she was to have pain in childbirth and given the task of being "אם כל חי".

The ideal – Ramban claims that a world without free will is the ideal, and even suggests that in Messianic times, the world will revert back to the pre-sin conditions in the Garden of Eden.³⁴



Intellectual Knowledge

Partaking from the Tree affected the intellect of man. This approach subdivides regarding the specifics of what the Tree imparted and whether it increased or decreased man's intellectual capabilities:

Intelligence

Prior to the sin, humans were similar to small children who are unaware of their surroundings. The Tree granted them intellect.

SOURCES: U. Cassuto

"עץ הדעת טוב ורע" – Cassuto points out that no where in the Tree's name is there a concept of *differentiation* between good and bad, suggesting that the Tree did not grant the ability to distinguish between the two, but rather provided knowledge about the world at large, from good to bad.³⁵ The phrase "טוב ורע" might, thus, be understood as a merism, a literary device in which totality is expressed by contrasting opposites.³⁶

Intellectual knowledge before the sin – Cassuto suggests that prior to the sin, man was like a young child who knows very little of the world around him.³⁷ He could understand basic commands, but was ignorant of deeper thought and unaware of some of even the most basic of facts.³⁸

"וידעו כי עירומם הם..." – As evidence of his understanding, Cassuto points out that the verse does not state that after eating, Adam and Chavvah learned to evaluate or judge their nakedness in any way, but rather that they simply *knew* of their nakedness. This was an objective fact that they were first cognizant of now.

Sin rewarded? One might question, was it not better for man to be an intellectual being than an ignorant child? Why would Hashem have wanted to keep knowledge from man? Or, as Rambam asks, how could the crowning glory of mankind come only as a result of sin? Cassuto replies that intellect is a double edged sword, for with knowledge comes pain, sorrow, and worry.³⁹ Hashem wanted to protect mankind from these. Ignorance is bliss, and Hashem wanted man to remain in his childlike innocence with all his needs provided for and none of the responsibilities and accompanying fears of adulthood.⁴⁰

"והייתם כאלהים ידעי טוב ורע" – Cassuto understands "אלהים" to refer to angels and agrees that knowledge does indeed make one more similar to angelic beings. However, since man is not equipped with all the means to overcome the hardships that accompany knowledge, this is not necessarily a positive change for man.

Sinning without knowledge? One might question how man could sin, and moreover, how could he be held accountable, if he had no intellect when the command was given to him. Cassuto implies that Adam

and Chavvah, like small children, did have a basic understanding of "do's" and "don'ts". This sufficed to deserve them punishment when they transgressed.⁴¹

"כִּי בַיּוֹם אָכַלְךָ מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת תָּמוּת" – Cassuto suggests that had man not sinned, he could have merited to eat from the Tree of Life and lived an eternal life in the paradise of Eden. With disobedience, though, that path was cut off, and death was decreed.

Punishment or corrective? Cassuto views the punishments given to Adam and Chavvah as both punitive and corrective in nature. Though Chavvah was cursed with pain in childbirth, she was also promised that despite the decree of mortality, the species would continue. Similarly, though man was banished from the Garden and cursed that he must toil, he was still given a means to support and nourish himself.



Subjective Knowledge

Before the sin, humans had innate, objective knowledge of truths and falsehoods, knowledge gained by pure analytical reasoning. Afterwards, their intellectual level dropped and became the subjective knowledge of moral convention, knowledge gained by custom and empirical observation.

SOURCES: Rambam, Ralbag

Meaning of the root "דעת" – Rambam understands "דעת" according to its simplest meaning, to refer to knowledge.

Meaning of "טוב ורע" – Rambam and Ralbag define "טוב ורע" as the beautiful and disgraceful,⁴² not to be confused with the true and false. They, thus, differentiate between two types of knowledge, the objective knowledge of "truth and falsehood" and the subjective knowledge of "good and bad". The former are facts achieved through intellectual reasoning ("מושכלות"), while the latter are individual perceptions, based on human observations or moral conventions ("מפורסמות") which can be mistaken. Eating from the Tree, thus, caused a regression in the knowledge of mankind, taking him from the certainty of "necessary truths" to the ambiguity of "relative truths".

Intellectual knowledge before the sin – Rambam points out that it is inconceivable that man would attain intellectual knowledge, the highest of endowments, as a result of sin. Moreover, as only intellectual beings can be commanded, Adam of necessity must have had some knowledge before the sin. This leads him to suggest that man was created with a more perfect knowledge,⁴³ and eating from the Tree caused a deterioration in that knowledge.

"וַיִּדְעוּ כִּי עֲרֻמָּם הֵם..." – One of the starkest examples of "moral convention" is the concept that nakedness is shameful. When humans knew only "truths and falsehoods", nakedness was not seen as a derogatory state. It was only after eating of the Tree that they viewed it as "bad".

"וְהָיִיתֶם כְּאֱלֹהִים יֹדְעֵי טוֹב וָרָע" – As Rambam and Ralbag view the knowledge imparted by the Tree as a regression, they must explain how it enabled man to become more like God. They, thus, understand "אלהים" in the secular sense of the word to refer to political leaders. Such leaders are guided by moral conventions as they govern and set standards of behavior.

"**הֵן הָאָדָם הָיָה כְּאֶחָד מִמֶּנּוּ לִדְעַת טוֹב וָרָע**" – This verse is also difficult, as it, too, implies that man became more like God after the sin. Both Rambam and Ralbag are forced to both repunctuate and reinterpret certain words in the verse to suggest a different meaning:

- **Reinterpret the word "מִמֶּנּוּ"** – In his Commentary to the Mishnah, Rambam follows the Targum and suggests that the word "מִמֶּנּוּ" does not mean "from us" but "from him" (and, as such, there is no comparison to God). This necessitates re-punctuating the verse so that it reads, "Man is one, i.e. unique; from him there is knowledge of good and bad". Hashem is, thus, pointing out that man now has subjective knowledge that emanates from him (and not from Hashem).⁴⁴
- **Reread the verse as a question** – Ralbag, instead, suggests that the verse should be read as a question. Fed up with Adam, Hashem rhetorically asks, "Have I made man like one of us, the higher beings, just so that he could attain knowledge of the "good and bad"?! If he focuses on such knowledge, is there any hope that he will ever achieve eternal life?"⁴⁵

"**וַתֵּרָא הָאִשָּׁה כִּי טוֹב הָעֵץ לְמַאֲכָל וְכִי תֵאוֹהּ הוּא לְעֵינֶיהָ...**" – These words are difficult for this position as they imply that even before eating from the Tree, Chavvah already had subjective knowledge of "good and bad", as she was able to evaluate the Tree as being pleasurable to the senses and good to eat.⁴⁶

- Rambam claims that it was this decision to veer after pleasure and desire, rather than being controlled by the intellect alone, which was actually the first stage of the sin. This, though, still implies that subjective knowledge existed prior to the sin.
- Ralbag explains that man always had the capacity for both types of knowledge and the prohibition was a warning to focus solely on objective truths and not to veer after the sensual and the subjective truths of good and bad. If so, though, the Tree in itself did not bequeath new knowledge; eating from it simply marked man's decision to engage in subjective truths.⁴⁷

Story as allegory – Ralbag reads the story of the sin in the Garden of Eden as allegorical. Rambam is elusive but appears to agree.⁴⁸ As such, both have much more leeway in interpreting the verses than those who assumes that all should be read according to its simple sense. [Thus, for Ralbag, the Tree of Knowledge represented subjective truth but did not actually grant such knowledge etc.]



Morality

After eating from the Tree, universal concepts of right and wrong were instilled in mankind.

SOURCES: R. D"Z Hoffmann

Meaning of "טוֹב וָרָע" – R. D"Z Hoffmann asserts that knowing good and bad refers to differentiating between right and wrong. The Tree, though, did not grant knowledge of all morality,⁴⁹ but only of those universal morals shared by every society.⁵⁰

Intellectual knowledge before the sin – R. Hoffmann implies that man was born with an intellect, but he claims that upon creation man did not yet possess even the most basic concepts of good and evil. This is not because he was not meant to have such knowledge,⁵¹ but because Hashem wished that humans receive their moral training directly from Him.⁵² Only via direct Divine teaching could their perfection be ensured.⁵³

Why make the Tree at all? If man was meant to be trained by Hashem, why create a Tree which would provide an alternate, but undesired route, to only part of that same knowledge? According to R. Hoffmann, the Tree was necessary if man was to have free will. Hashem gave humans the choice to obey or disregard Divine directives, to follow Hashem or be their own guides. As such, Hashem's first directive was a test to see which path he was to take. If he passed, and chose Hashem as His teacher, man would attain the immortality granted by the Tree of Life. If he failed, though, he would need the Tree of Knowledge, for if he were not given at least the most basic concepts of morality, he could become totally corrupt.⁵⁴ As such, the Tree served simultaneously as a test and a (partial) cure for failure.

"...וַיֵּדְעוּ כִּי עֶרְוָה הֵם" – The idea that nakedness is shameful is one of the universal concepts of morality, and was thus among the knowledge granted by the Tree.

"וְהָיִיתֶם כְּאֱלֹהִים יָדְעֵי טוֹב וָרָע" – In gaining a modicum of morality, man did become more like God and angelic beings. However, man would have achieved the same goal (and to a higher degree) had he not eaten from the Tree.

"כִּי בְיוֹם אֶכְלֶךָ מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת תָּמוּת" – R. Hoffmann asserts that with sin, mortality became necessary to help man come back to His Creator. Death redeems man from sin and allows him eternal life afterwards.

The Torah: A New Tree of Life – R. Hoffmann suggests that though Adam failed to learn directly from Hashem, later Hashem created a new nation who was once again given such an opportunity. In giving the Torah to the Nation of Israel, Hashem provided them with a comprehensive guide to morality and full knowledge of "good and bad", thus granting them a new Tree of Life.⁵⁵



No New Knowledge

Eating from the fruit of the Tree did not change man's nature, but rather manifested man's failure to recognize that it is God who determines what is "good" and "bad".

SOURCES: R. Hirsch, Benno Jacob

"עֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וָרָע" – These sources claim that the fruit of the Tree did not have any intrinsic qualities through which it could provide knowledge of any sort. Thus, the name "עֵץ הַדַּעַת" did not reflect the character of the Tree; rather it was so called "עַל שֵׁם סוּפוֹ", based on the outcome of the story.

- According to R. Hirsch, through the Tree, man was to demonstrate how he planned to determine what was good and what was bad: whether he would decide this on his own, or allow God to determine it.⁵⁶
- B. Jacob, instead, looks to Devarim 30:15-16 to suggest that "good" refers to obedience to God, which is accompanied by life and blessing, and "bad" to disobedience which brings with it death and curses. The Tree was so called because it was the touchstone which was to demonstrate whether man chose obedience or not.⁵⁷

Purpose of the prohibition – These sources view the prohibition as a means to test man:

- R. Hirsch suggests that the prohibition was a test in self-control; could man control his desires and subordinate the dictates of his senses to Hashem's will? Hashem presented him with a tree which was pleasing to the eyes, palate, and intellect, and thus appeared to be "good". Yet, the fact that

Hashem prohibited it, defined the fruit as "bad". Would man recognize that morality is determined by Hashem's will alone, or would he decide for himself what was good and what was bad?

- Benno Jacob similarly suggests that the prohibition was meant simply to remind man that he is not God and that he has a Master whom he is to obey.⁵⁸ Would man recognize that he need obey his Maker?

"...וַיִּדְעוּ כִּי עֵרְוָם הֵם..." – R. Hirsch explains that with disobedience (not the fruit) came shame.⁵⁹ When man is completely in the service of Hashem, he is not ashamed by any part of his body because he is physically pure as he submits himself to Hashem's will. It is only sin which makes the physical loathsome. B. Jacob adds that guilt is always accompanied by a desire to hide and cover up.

Becoming God-like

- "הֵן הָאָדָם הָיָה קְאָחָד מִמֶּנּוּ לִדְעַת טוֹב וָרָע" – R. Hirsch⁶⁰ explains the verse to mean "man has become one who knows from himself [rather than from God] good and bad". In defying Hashem's commandment, man decided that he was the one to determine good and bad, basing his decision on his senses rather than Hashem's command.
- "וְהָיִיתֶם כְּאֱלֹהִים יָדְעֵי טוֹב וָרָע" – See also Abarbanel who points to the opinion of "חכמי האומות" to explain these words of the snake. They suggest that in deciding not to submit themselves to Hashem's will and to instead act on their own determination of right and wrong, man became Godlike, in the sense that he did not submit to a higher authority.

Intellectual knowledge before the sin – R. Hirsch opines that man must have had both intellectual knowledge and free choice before the sin or he could not be commanded or held accountable for disobedience.

"כִּי בַיּוֹם אָכַלְךָ מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת תָּמוּת" – R. Hirsch⁶¹ suggests that since banishment from home can sometimes take the place of death,⁶² Adam and Chavvah really were punished with this "lesser death" on the very day that they ate from the Tree. He explains that death is not the termination of existence, but only of existence in this world. Thus, the transition between life in Eden and life outside the Garden might not have been so different than the transition between this world and the next, and could justifiably be referred to as "death".

Punishments – R. Hirsch views the various punishments as educative in nature:

- The punishment of enmity between snake and man was to serve as a reminder to man that he is above the sensuality of beasts. Unlike animals he is not meant to act on instinct and desire alone, but to abide by Hashem's dictates.
- The punishments of Adam and Chavvah were meant to teach them the importance of renunciation. Woman's whole life was to become a sacrifice for the other. Man was to toil in order to bring forth food from the earth; he, too, was forced to sacrifice in order to produce. Mankind was, thus, to learn self-control and not to be swayed by desires. Ultimately such renunciation would bring him closer to Hashem and the recognition that only He determines what is truly good or bad.

Lost access to the Tree of Life – B. Jacob suggests that with the sin, access to eternal life had to be blocked as a moral necessity, for death is the most effective threat against sin.⁶³

¹ For a few of many examples, see Bereshit 4:1, 4:17, 4:25, and 19:5.

² This position would have to say, as does R"Y Bekhor Shor, that Hashem's words to man in Bereshit 1, "פָּרוּ וּרְבוּ", were only relayed after the sin. He proves this from the continuation of the verse, "וּמִלֹּאֵי אֶת הָאָרֶץ", which was also relevant only after the expulsion from the Garden.

³ He, in fact, claims that the Tree aroused sexual desire merely from viewing or feeling it (see Bereshit 3:6). Hashem did not prohibit these actions, knowing that a small amount of desire would be beneficial to man and lead him to couple with his wife.

⁴ Cf. Radak who speaks in terms of permitted and prohibited sexual actions.

⁵ Throughout the story, the issue of nakedness is highlighted (see 2:26, 3:7, 3:10, 3:11, and 3:22), suggesting that it is intrinsic to the story.

⁶ Beforehand they were like toddlers who are not inhibited to take off their clothing in public.

⁷ He points out that had it been just the snake who made this claim, one could suggest that he was simply lying, but since Hashem Himself says, "הֵן הָאָדָם הָיָה כְּאִשְׁדּוּ מִמֶּנִּי לְדַעַת טוֹב וָרָע", it must be a fact.

⁸ See his comments on Bereshit 3:1.

⁹ He also raises the possibility that Hashem's words are said ironically. Hashem asks, "Has man become like one of us, just because he now knows good and bad?!"

¹⁰ Ibn Ezra and Radak themselves do not say this, and it is unclear how they think that reinterpreting "אֱלֹהִים" in this manner solves the problem. In addition, in verse 22, Hashem includes Himself with the angels, making the reading even more difficult.

¹¹ Abarbanel points to Bavli Shabbat which suggests that had Adam not sinned, he would have had eternal life. He suggests that the Tree of Life had rejuvenating properties. Moreover, Hashem would have guarded mankind from evil, allowing him to live forever. Thus according to him, the tree itself did not automatically grant immortality, but eating from it while meriting Hashem's providence would have provided it.

¹² Radak explains that Hashem's words, "וְלִקְחָהּ גַּם מִעֵץ הַחַיִּים וְאָכַל וְחָי לְעֹלָם", do not imply that man would have lived forever, but only that he would be able to live a longer time than he deserved after sinning. ["לְעֹלָם" does not mean "forever" but "for a long period of time". See Shemot 21:6 and Shemuel I 1:22 where the word also appears not to mean forever.]

¹³ He also raises the possibility that the verse means that from the day that man ate from the Tree, he began to move towards death, i.e. that day was to be the beginning of the end. However, given that Adam lived for many centuries after the sin, it would seem to difficult to mark such an early day in his lifetime as the turning point towards death.

¹⁴ According to him, the verse does not mean that death would come on the day that man sinned. Rather, on the day that man sinned, an earlier death than originally planned was decreed.

¹⁵ Excesses disrupt the body's balance, so the increase in sexual desire would of necessity come to harm the body.

¹⁶ Cf. Ibn Ezra who explains that Adam's first act after the expulsion, when he realized that he was not to live forever, was to perpetuate the species.

¹⁷ Radak himself does not say this, but the idea could work with the variation of this approach which suggests that the Tree of Knowledge introduced the mating instinct. See R"Y Bekhor Shor who points out that when Chavvah was initially created, Hashem refers to her only as an "עֲזָרָה כְּנֶגְדּוֹ", someone whose role was to help, but not necessarily to mate with Adam.

¹⁸ He does suggest, though, that originally they might have been meant to bear only one or two offspring, since more would not have been necessary if they were to be immortal. When Hashem decreed upon them mortality after the sin, there was a need to bear more children.

¹⁹ Cf. Abarbanel who agrees that Chavvah was punished measure for measure, but develops the details differently.

²⁰ See A. Korman, הבריאה והמבול, (Tel Aviv, 1980).

²¹ Many species have specific mating seasons which are optimal for the survival of the offspring, further suggesting that procreation is the main goal of their sexual activity.

²² Rashi speaks of the Tree introducing the evil inclination (which allowed man to then differentiate between good and bad), but makes no mention of free will itself. Nonetheless, without an impulse to do evil, it is difficult to say that one has the free will to do so.

²³ He, too, does not mention the issue of free will, limiting his discussion to the introduction (or strengthening of) the evil impulse.

²⁴ R. Y'S Reggio also does not mention free will explicitly, speaking only of the evil impulse.

²⁵ R. Bachya similarly suggests that before the sin humans were like angels with "יצר הרע"; afterwards they fell to a lower level.

²⁶ R"Y Bekhor Shor implies this as well when he claims that eating from the Tree brought about deceit, arrogance, jealousy, and with such traits, the desire to steal, rob, and do as one pleases. Later in his comments, he says more explicitly, "מאחר שאכלת מן העץ ונכנס בך יצר הרע כל כך". It is not clear from this, however, if he thinks the impulse was first introduced after eating, or if it always existed and was simply strengthened after the sin.

²⁷ R"Y Bekhor Shor, instead, implies that among the evils introduced by the Tree was haughtiness; this led Adam and Chavvah to feel that nakedness did not become them and that they were worthy of being clothed.

²⁸ Abarbanel adds that man, by definition, is a being with free choice, so it is inconceivable that he would have been created without it. He writes, "כל טובו ושלמותו של אדם היה במציאות הבחירה והיכולת על הטוב על הרע, כפי יצרו ואם לא היה כן לא היה אדם".

²⁹ See 3:6, "וַתֵּרָא הָאִשָּׁה כִּי טוֹב הָעֵץ לְמַאֲכָל וְכִי תִצְּוָה הוּא לְעֵינַיִם וְנִחְמַד הָעֵץ לְהַשְׂכִּיל".

³⁰ See R. Bachya who similarly suggests that even without an evil inclination, it is possible to sometimes veer off the correct path, and even angels (the state to which he compares man pre-sin) sometimes stray from what is right. He points to the angels in the story of Sodom who sinned in arrogance by attributing the destruction of the city to themselves rather than Hashem. [They say, "כִּי מִשְׁחָתִים אֲנַחְנוּ אֶת הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה"]

³¹ One might even suggest that there was nothing inherent in the Tree that strengthened the inclination to do evil, but that the very act of disobedience made it easier to sin in the future ("עבירה גוררת עבירה").

³² Ramban says this in the name of Chazal (Bavli Shabbat 55b). He also raises the possibility that Hashem is saying that on the day man eats from the Tree, he will be obligated in death ("חייב מיתה"), the date of which Hashem is to determine.

³³ Ramban himself explains differently, suggesting that since Chavvah commanded her husband to eat from the Tree, she was punished to be subject to his commands.

³⁴ See his comments to Devarim 30:6.

³⁵ Cassuto points to the parallel between the phrases "כִּי כְּמִלְאָהּ הָאֱ-לֹהִים כֵּן אֲדֹנִי הַמֶּלֶךְ לִשְׁמֵעַ הַטּוֹב וְהָרַע" in Shemuel II 14:17 and "וְאֲדֹנִי הָכֶם כְּחֻקְמַת מִלְּאָהּ הָאֱ-לֹהִים לְדַעַת אֶת כָּל אֲשֶׁר בְּאָרֶץ" in 14:20 to prove that knowing

"good and bad" is equivalent to knowing "all that is in the land".

³⁶ Another example of merism is the phrase "young and old" to refer to everyone, or "they searched high and low" to express that they searched everywhere.

³⁷ He points to Devarim 1:39, where children are described as not knowing good or bad: "וּבְנֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יָדְעוּ הַיּוֹם טוֹב וָרָע".

³⁸ See Rashi, Rashbam, and Ibn Ezra who all question this assumption from the fact that man was assigned the task of naming the animals, what they see as a sign of his wisdom.

³⁹ He points to Kohelet 1:18, "יוֹסִיף דַּעַת יוֹסִיף מְכָאֹב".

⁴⁰ Thus, while the concept that man might not have been meant to be a highly intellectual being would be anathema to Rambam, Cassuto sees such an individual as living in an idyllic state.

⁴¹ Cassuto suggests that Adam and Chavvah's sin stemmed from their not being satisfied with what they had. Hashem punished them by giving them what they wanted. Since man was not satisfied with his life in the Garden, Hashem sent him outside. As Adam and Chavvah wanted not just the "very good" of the world that was created for them, they were given the ability to experience both good and bad.

⁴² Cf. the reconstructed commentary of Rashbam in which he, too, defines "טוב וָרָע" as the beautiful and ugly. However, unlike this position, he does not contrast such knowledge with the objective knowledge of "truth and falsehood", but instead appears to imply that the Tree granted mankind an appreciation of aesthetics. Thus, after eating he felt that nakedness was ugly, while decorating one's self was beautiful. Not enough of Rashbam's commentary on the story has survived to know how this idea would be developed and why Hashem would not have wanted mankind to have such an appreciation.

⁴³ In fact, when the verse describes man as being created in "the image of God" it refers to his being created with such intellect.

⁴⁴ It should be noted, however, that from the context of Rambam's remarks, he is reading the verse differently, and presents Hashem as saying that man is unique in that he has free will to choose between good and bad. This would mean that "knowing good and bad" in this verse has a different meaning (free will) than it did earlier in the chapter (knowledge of moral convention). It is possible that Rambam is inconsistent between his two works, and in commenting on the Mishnah, he was not working with the understanding of "subjective truths" later laid forth in the Moreh Nevukhim.

⁴⁵ This understanding does not read the phrase "פֶּן יִשְׁלַח יָדוֹ" as "**lest** he send forth his hand" but as "is there any hope that he will...". This, though, is not the simple understanding of the word "פֶּן" throughout Tanakh.

⁴⁶ See also R. Hirsch who questions how man could possibly have free will if he did not have concepts of "good" and "bad".

⁴⁷ Cf. R. Hirsch below.

⁴⁸ See Moreh Nevukhim 2:30. This is how Abarbanel understands Rambam's words in this passage.

⁴⁹ Cf. R. Saadia Gaon who also suggests that the Tree imparted only partial knowledge (though he does not limit this knowledge to morals and is ambiguous regarding what exactly the Tree did impart). He points to the many verses which use the phrase "good and bad" to prove that it is not a sweeping term that covers all knowledge. It, rather, refers to the positive and negative aspects of a specific subject. Thus, for example, when Moshe speaks of "וּבְנֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יָדְעוּ הַיּוֹם טוֹב וָרָע" he is referring to youths who do not yet know the art of war, but who were competent in many other areas of learning.

⁵⁰ This includes the concepts that murder and stealing are wrong, or that expressing gratitude to parents is right. According to him, the reason that all societies agree regarding certain basic concepts of right and wrong is because such morality was bequeathed by the Tree to Adam, and from him to all of mankind.

⁵¹ He points out that without any concepts of good and evil, there could be no possibility of free choice, which is fundamental to humankind, so it is impossible that man was never meant to have such knowledge.

⁵² Here, too, R. Saadia precedes R. Hoffmann, claiming that being a student of Hashem meant that man would be free of doubts and mistakes regarding whatever Hashem taught.

⁵³ It is not clear, though, why Hashem could not have ensured such perfect knowledge by instilling it in man before he was created.

⁵⁴ Thus, Hashem was able to ensure that despite man's decision to be his own guide, all humans knew some fundamentals of right and wrong.

⁵⁵ As Mishlei says, "עץ חיים היא למחזיקים בה".

⁵⁶ Cf. Abarbanel who might allude to this idea in the name of "חכמי האומות", who note that in eating from the tree, man decided to determine on his own what was good and what was bad, no longer submitting to Hashem's determination.

⁵⁷ Thus, in their overall understanding of the story, R. Hirsch and Benno Jacob are quite similar.

⁵⁸ Thus, the existence of the prohibition was more important than its content.

⁵⁹ The fruit itself brought no new awareness, but the act of sin aroused a feeling of shame.

⁶⁰ See R. Saadia.

⁶¹ He also brings the explanation that upon eating, man was liable for death, but he was not meant to die immediately.

⁶² As an example, he points to Kayin's punishment.

⁶³ See R"Y Bekhor Shor above who explains similarly.