

THE PARADISE PARADOX

Boris Burshteyn, 5779 (18 August 2019)

Many thanks go to my friend Steve Astrachan, our president Deborah Sosebee, my daughter Gabriela and my wife Sophia for helping to improve this mini-drash.

PROLOGUE – A CONCEALED TREASURE

A precious gem hides between the lines in Bereshit. It is the Paradise Paradox: *How to pursue the G-d given passion for knowing Good and Evil after G-d declared the source of such Knowledge off limit?* The Torah text radiates a fascinating answer when simultaneously elucidated from two opposite perspectives.¹

TO EAT OR NOT TO EAT?

In the beginning, Adam and Hava knew nothing about Good and Evil. Then the presumed source of that Knowledge – the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden – became forbidden on the threat of death by G-d's decree. Yet G-d, who is the root of all Knowledge, created them in His image. Also, the entire Torah manifests G-d's will for people to embrace Good and reject Evil. So, how should the first couple learn about Good and Evil to justify their image and conform to the Torah?

On the one hand, Adam and Hava could take from the Tree of Knowledge. But that would be bad as they would have disobeyed the G-d's order. On the other hand, they could ignore the Tree's wisdom. But that would be bad since such inaction would have broken their likeness to G-d and confronted the Torah spirit.

Have Adam and Hava apprehended that they are facing a paradox? The Torah tells us they did not see this ambiguity, much less resolved it. Although they had the privilege of directly petitioning G-d, the Maker of the Cosmos and the foremost authority on Good and Evil, Adam and Hava impulsively fastened their beliefs to a tree. Incited by a serpent, they hastened to satisfy the innate thirst for Knowledge from a plain fruit. The Tree failed Hava's hope to get an actual awareness: they just perceived their nudity.

Did Adam and Hava unwittingly commit the first-ever idolatry, or merely disobey out of confusion? Contrasting opinions notwithstanding, the offense ended badly as G-d severely disciplined and ousted both from the Garden. This drama prodded humanity to start an arduous journey from the Gates of Paradise to Mount Sinai where G-d presented to Moses Torah -- the real source of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

VIEWPOINT 1: OUTSIDE THE GARDEN, G-D WAS STANDING BY

G-d's references to Good permeate Bereshit throughout the days of Creation. Without fail, time after time, upon finishing every major part of the World, He sees that it is "good." Moreover, G-d proclaims the whole World as "very good!" Furthermore, He notices that being alone was "not good" for Adam. Lastly, it is G-d who plants the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Surely, G-d knows a great deal about the "good!"

At the same time, He does not declare the first man and woman to be "good." We will see that to become good in the eyes of G-d, the human race must first attain the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Did Adam comprehend anything about Good and Evil? Although created in G-d's image, he, unlike G-d, had not the slightest idea. Being alone did not bother Adam: he was just blindly looking for a companion among animals because G-d made him do so. While showing an uncanny ingenuity by naming the animals, Adam stayed nonchalant after concluding his mission without finding a spouse. When G-d delivered to him his wife Hava, Adam had extolled the virtues of marriage but forgot to call it "good."

However, Adam and Hava knew about the Tree of Knowledge. Alas, G-d forbade Adam to partake from the Tree, warning of a mortal punishment. That stopped Adam and Hava from acquiring the Knowledge by a simple act of eating and at the same time placed them into an ambiguous circumstance. Yet they both missed this: G-d (but no one else!) could help them out because only He is the real cause of all that is Good.

VIEWPOINT 2: INSIDE THE GARDEN, THE TREE WAS A FAKE

To understand why Adam and Hava neglected the Paradise Paradox, it is instrumental asking "from whom was Adam protecting the Garden?" There was no need for shielding it from G-d, the Molder of Creation. Adam may have been guarding against the animals keen to snatch from the Tree of Life. Although the creatures kept trying to sneak in, they were deterred by Adam and his helper Hava.

Then the serpent, the most cunning of all, devised a scheme to bypass the ignorant watchmen. It earned Hava's trust and provoked her to defy G-d. It lied that after eating from the Tree of Knowledge, she

¹ To skip the Torah study, turn the page for the full answer.

will not just get the Knowledge but also surely survives. In its mind, the serpent might have calculated that Adam and Hava will perish, or G-d will expel them from Paradise. Then a path to the Tree of Life shall open free. The sinister conspiracy worked although with unexpected results for people and beasts alike.

Akin a placebo, the Tree of Knowledge allowed Adam and Hava just a glimpse at the wisdom. Still not grasping Good and Evil, they only became aware of being naked like the animals, one of which they wrongly befriended.

It further harmed Adam and Hava with adverse short-term side effects. They resented when G-d spotted them dressed up in the newly sewn fig-leaf attire. Adam blamed Hava who accused the snake yet none was embarrassed by forfeiting guard's duties. Neither they were ashamed of listening to the snake rather than inquiring of G-d. Worst of all, they failed to repent after violating the G-d's command.

Far from empowering, the Tree of Knowledge destroyed their descendants long-term. The Torah conveys that all remained mortal and returned to dust (as none tasted from the Tree of Life), but nobody gained even a grain of Knowledge. Adam and Hava beheld the horrific death of their son Havel murdered by their firstborn Cain. Then, the subsequent generations lived cluelessly before succumbing to sheer Evil and thus expiring in flood. Perhaps, this is why, foreseeing those events, G-d avoided branding mankind "good."

As for the snake's plot, it grossly misfired. G-d replaced the troubled watchers with a cherub and a fiery rotating sword. Not a soul could plunder the Tree of Life preserved by the new sentries.

RESOLUTION SHINING IN THE CROSS-VIEW

The above Torah study leads to the conclusion that the Tree of Knowledge bore no fruits of enlightenment. G-d only planted it to awake the people's dormant desire for Knowledge. G-d needed them to face the perplexing controversy and pray to Him for a way out. Then G-d would reveal the truth about the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and teach such Knowledge Himself. He could have even lifted the ban on the Tree of Life. Anyway, inquiring G-d would be a brilliant resolution of the Paradise Paradox!

Instead, Adam and Hava bungled this opportunity when they carelessly fell for the snake's deceit. Regretfully, they rushed to learn from a fruit, not from G-d; trusted in a reptile, not in the Creator of the Universe. Some may argue whether that was pure idolatry or a colossal lapse in judgment. Regardless, the first family displayed an unfortunate lack of Knowledge in its pursuit.

Following their transgression, centuries passed while people remained oblivious to Good and Evil. In the word of G-d from the Book of Jonah, they did "not know their right hand from their left." It was Abraham who first figured out that the Knowledge is not of Earthly but Heavenly origin. He realized it is neither a live tree nor its fruits, neither a dead stone nor a carved image but G-d who is the supreme giver of the laws of Good and Evil. In Vayiera, right before the destruction of Sodom, Abraham acknowledges G-d as the "Judge of all the Earth" while urging Him "to do justice."

That was a prophetic insight. It pivoted human history onto a path to the ultimate goal: becoming good by learning Good and Evil from all commandments G-d planted not in the Garden but in the Torah.

EPILOGUE -- TWO VIEWPOINTS

Everyone agrees that certain statements are either false or true. Consider a pronouncement "I am a king of Prussia." It is undoubtedly wrong because there is no country called Prussia today. Contrary to that, the declaration "This author is just a poor Russian immigrant speak no English" is patently accurate.

Aside from such clear-cut sentences, there are paradoxes: those are both false and true at the same time. One of the shortest is the Liar's Paradox, which says "This statement is false." Indeed, if it is true, then it negates itself. But if that sentence is false, then again, it attests to its own truth. No matter the supposition, the conclusion is contradictory. Although short and simple, this is a genuine unsolvable paradox.

In comparison, the Paradise Paradox appears so much more sophisticated: how can one possibly find an answer to such a "Catch-22?" Some mysteries can be cracked from outside by examining their context.² Others can be burst from inside by turning the source of a problem into a solution.³ We have arrived at the answer after combining both ideas and discovered that outside the Garden, G-d was ready to help while inside the Garden, the Tree of Knowledge had no magic. Finally, we learned that Abraham found this first!

² The Great Jewish King Solomon settled a maternal dispute between the actual and pretend mothers by involving the mothers in its solution.

³ The renowned Austrian/American mathematician Kurt Gödel used a mathematical analogy of the liar's paradox to prove the incompleteness of the axioms of Arithmetic.