

# CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

## THE DANGERS OF KNOWLEDGE ADDICTION

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In eleventh grade, my rebbe turned to our class and said: "Whoever doesn't understand that the Garden of Eden is a metaphor/*mashal* – is an idiot." That moment has been a useful religious bulwark for me over the years. It also gives me space to focus on the more important question: a metaphor for what? And how should I go about answering that question?

One might think to search for the *nimsbal* that best accounts for all the details of the *mashal*. But (as Maimonides warns) narrative metaphors often include details that are not directly significant to meaning. The *mashal* has its own literary integrity, and some details may be necessary for the story to work even though they don't affect the *nimsbal*.

Moreover, *meshalim* have two, diametrically opposed, pedagogic purposes. One is *kedei lesaber et ha'ozen*, to relate complicated or abstract ideas to concrete human experience. The other is to convey knowledge to the worthy and ready while denying it to the unworthy and unready. A useful technique for accomplishing the second purpose is the "red herring," the inclusion of a seemingly significant but actually meaningless detail. So the "omnisignificant" interpretation may fit the text best, and yet be inaccurate or superficial, silver filigree disguising a golden apple.

Reading Chapters 2-3 of Genesis, I tend to focus on the Tree of Knowledge, Good and Bad, and build interpretations of the Garden inductively, rather than trying to deduce the nature of the Tree from the overall Garden. And so it is a great joy to come across a genuinely new (to me) interpretation of the Tree, and even more so to share it

with you. Rabbi Itzile Volizhin, in his remarkably original Torah commentary *Peh Kadosh*, says the following:

ומעץ הדעת טוב ורע לא תאכל ממנו

כי ביום אכלך ממנו מות תמות –

ופשוטו שעפ"י דרך הטבע כך הוא:

אפילו הדבר טוב לו דבר שאדם חושק בו תמיד ומתאוה לו למאד, ואז אוכל בגודל תשוקתו, יכול להיות שמזיק לו מאד, ויוכל לגרום לו מיתה. ואף שאינו מת תיכף, אך מפני שבכל יום ויום ובכל שעה ושעה הוא הולך וקרב למות, ע"כ יקראו לו כבר מן עת האכילה מת.

וכן ביום אכלך ממנו - היינו מאותו יום ואילך - מות תמות – פ' מעט מעט,

כי בכל יום ויום הוא קרוב למיתה יותר ויותר.

כי באמת שקודם אכילתו מעץ הדעת לא היה עדיין מיתה בעולם, ומן עת האכילה, שאז נגזרה עליו מיתה, הלא הוא מתקרב בכל יום ויום אל המות

ועל כן אומר הכתוב בכפל לשון מות תמות - היינו בכל יום אתה מתקרב אל המות וד"ל

And from the Tree of Knowledge, Good and Bad – you must not eat from it, because on the day of your eating from it you will die, yes die:

*The peshat of this is that this is the natural way:*

*something that a human being continually yearns for and desires extremely, even if the thing is good for him, when he eats it to the great extent of his aspiration, it may greatly damage him, and can cause his death. Even though he does not die immediately, since every day and every hour he comes nearer to dying, he can be called dead from the moment of eating.*

*Thus on the day of your eating from it – meaning from that day on – you will die, yes die – meaning little by little, because each and every day he comes more and more near to death.*

*Because the truth is that before he ate from the Tree of Knowledge death was not yet in the world, but from the time of the eating, at which point death was decreed upon him, he indeed comes nearer each and every day to death.*

*Therefore the Torah says redundantly die, yes die, meaning that every day you come nearer to death. Enough said, for those with understanding.*

***The mission of the Center for Modern Torah Leadership is to foster a vision of fully committed halakhic Judaism that embraces the intellectual and moral challenges of modernity as spiritual opportunities to create authentic leaders. The Center carries out its mission through the Summer Beit Midrash program, the Rabbis and Educators Professional Development Institute, the Campus and Community Education Institutes, weekly Divrei Torah and our website, [www.torahleadership.org](http://www.torahleadership.org), which houses hundreds of articles and audio lectures.***

אמר להם: הזהרו בכבוד חבריכם, ומנעו בניכם מן ההגיון, והושיבו בן  
ברכי תלמידי חכמים, וכשאתם מתפללים - דעו לפני מי אתם עומדים, ובשביל  
כך תזכו לחיי העולם הבא.

*A beraita:*

*When Rabbi Eliezer fell ill, his students entered to visit him.  
They said to him: Rabbeinu, teach us the paths of life and we will  
thereby merit The Coming World.*

*He said to them: Be careful of the honor of your colleagues; restrain your  
children from hahigayon; place them between the knees of scholars, when you  
pray – know before Whom you stand; and for this you will merit the life of the  
Coming World.*

The mystery term here is *hahigayon*, which seems etymologically to refer to some form of intellection. Rashi comments: “מההגיון - לא תרגילום במקרא יותר מדאי, משום דמשכא /From *hahigayon* – do not familiarize them with Scripture overmuch, because it attracts them.” The study of Written Torah is addictive, as a brilliant satire in *Hamevaser* pointed out years ago. But this does not mean that it should not be learned, just that it should not be learned overmuch. I suggest that this means that one should not try **overmuch** to learn the text of Torah without reference to Oral Torah, traditionally attested interpretations. Might *peshat* be the knowledge that Rav Itzile attributes to the Tree?

On this reading, the metaphor of Genesis is self-referential. To seek to understand the Tree, one must first recognize that one cannot understand it without help from others who already do so. One must honor the knowledge of one's friends, and train children to respect tradition.

Three uncautionary notes in conclusion:

- 1) Rabbi Eliezer is often represented as particularly devoted to traditional knowledge. Perhaps Rav Itzile has recreated Rabbi Eliezer's understanding of the metaphor, but the bulk of Jewish Tradition has adopted others' understandings.
- 2) As Rabbi Itzile implies, the knowledge of the Tree is good, perhaps essential. Perhaps forewarned is forearmed, and we can taste it without becoming addicted.
- 3) All the other trees of the garden were simply good to eat. There is no religious danger in addiction to knowledge, so long as we do not become convinced that the individual or collective human literary sensibility is the measure of all things. *Shabbat Shalom!*

Now the phrase “enough said, for those with understanding” suggests that Rav Itzile's interpretation itself has an exoteric and esoteric component. Let's see how much of that we can unpack. Exoterically, he resolves the problem of Adam's failure to die *on the day* he ate the fruit by positing that he *began the process of and the march toward dying*. This interpretive move can be accomplished without saying anything about the nature of the fruit; mortal beings are by definition always on the march toward dying, and processes are notoriously difficult to define. But R. Itzile goes further; he says that while eating the fruit generated mortality, it did not generate **inevitable** mortality. Adam would still have lived forever had he been able to resist the fruit the next day, or the next, or the day after that. But one taste of the fruit made it impossible for him to ever resist it for long, and eventually he overdosed.

I think the textual clue here is that it is *the Tree of Knowledge, Good and Bad*. Most readers understand this to mean “*knowledge of good and knowledge of bad*,” but Rav Itzile is perhaps more precise in choosing “*knowledge that is both good and bad*.” This in turn raises the question of how something can be simultaneously good and bad, to which he responds with his own metaphor of addiction.

So far, so good. Now we must ask: why is it the *Tree of Knowledge*? Perhaps knowledge is a red herring, and addiction per se is the original sin; R. Eliezer of Metz in his *Sefer Yereim* posits that the *ben sorer umoreh* (the rebellious son) is executed *al shem sofo*, because of what he is yet to do, because he is an addict, and the Torah knows that uncontrollable addiction leads inevitably to robbery and murder. But while the *Yereim* is a tempting read of the rebellious son, I am nervous about taking the metaphor that literally. Addictions can at least sometimes be broken; Deborah Klapper just today referred me to studies that suggest that a positive social environment significantly improves prognosis. And I find it very hard to believe that knowledge is red herring. So what we are really looking for is a type of knowledge that is dangerously addictive.

We don't have to look very far. Here is *Berakhot* 28b:

תנו רבנן:

כשהלה רבי אליעזר, נכנסו תלמידיו לבקר.

אמרו לו: רבינו, למדנו אורחות חיים ונוצה בהן לחיי העולם הבא.

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