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By

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God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and gave them the following instruction: “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat of it; for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Bereishith 2:16-17). It did not take long, though, for Adam and Eve to eat of this forbidden fruit, having been tempted by the serpent to do so.

But they did not die upon eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

Instead of punishing them with immediate death, God informed them of serious changes about to befall them. To Eve God said: “I will greatly multiply your pain and travail; in pain will you bring forth children (3:16).” To Adam God said: “By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread until you return unto the ground; for out of it you were taken; for dust you are and unto dust shall you return (3:19).”

What do these things have to do with the transgression? Since the sin was eating a forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve’s punishment might have been to suffer from eating and digestive disorders. Why should Eve now have to deal with pain during childbirth? Why should Adam now have to toil as he farmed for his own food? Why is he told that he is dust and will return to dust? How do these “punishments” fit the “crime?”

Perhaps this story needs to be understood not in terms of sin and punishment, but as a fundamental transition in the nature of humanity.

Before eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve existed in a quasi-conscious state. They were clearly on a higher spiritual/intellectual level than animals; but their basic needs were provided for them without their having to work or to plan ahead. Just as animals graze along from day to day without self-consciousness, so Adam and Eve were not self-conscious of their nakedness or of their mortality.

Upon eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, they suddenly became aware of death. They did not physically die at that moment but they became starkly conscious of death.

God then informed them of the consequences of their new knowledge. When animals give birth, they may experience physical pain, but this pain is simply a natural and passing discomfort. The animal gives birth and then recovers without an afterthought. But God informs Eve that she is not like the other animals; she has now become a conscious human being. She now must understand that when she suffers the pains of childbirth, her own life will be endangered.

When animals want to eat, they graze on what is readily available. But God informs Adam that he is not like the other animals; he has now become a conscious human being. If he wants to eat and to provide for his wife and family, he will have to work the fields, he will have to sweat, to plan, to worry. If he does not cultivate his food supply properly, he and his family will face starvation and death.

According to this interpretation, Adam and Eve before eating the forbidden fruit were in a state of pre-human consciousness. Only after eating from the fruit did they emerge as human beings aware of their mortality, aware of their responsibilities, aware of dangers that confronted them. They now realized clearly that they are dust and will return to dust.

If eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge was an essential step in the transition into developing a human consciousness, why then had God forbidden it? Perhaps the Almighty wanted Adam and Eve to first spend a period of time in the Garden of Eden and then gradually develop their human consciousness in a slower, more organic way. If they were to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil at a later time, they may have been better prepared to handle the challenges of being mortal human beings.

Significantly, after Adam and Eve were informed of the consequences of their having eaten the forbidden fruit, the very next verse in the Torah informs us: “And the man called his wife’s name Eve, because she was the mother of all living.” If Adam and Eve had just been informed of terrible punishments, this would be a very strange reaction from Adam. We might have expected him to ask for God’s mercy, to have Him reverse the punishment.

Yet, if we understand this episode as the dawning of human consciousness in the minds of Adam and Eve, we appreciate that they did not want to revert to their former state of pre-consciousness. They were beginning to internalize the message that they were now thinking human beings with great responsibilities on their shoulders. This was a daunting message… but also an empowering one. Adam now referred to his wife as “the mother of all living,” because she was to be

the matriarch of a new progeny of human beings, human beings who lived with all the strengths and weaknesses of being mortal.

The very next passage of the Torah informs us that God placed cherubim to guard the tree of life, with a flaming sword circling the tree in every direction. He did not want Adam and Eve to eat from this tree…even though it had not been previously forbidden to them. What this may mean is that as long as Adam and Eve were in their pre-human consciousness, unaware of their mortality, eating from the tree of life would make no difference. But now that they have eaten from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, they were fully conscious of the reality of death. It would be retrogressive to allow them to eat from the tree of life and to return to a life that seemed to be eternal. Eating from the tree of life would nullify the lesson they had learned from eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

Living with the knowledge of one's mortality makes life more intense, more precious. Each moment is a gift; once it passes, it cannot be retrieved. Living as thoughtful mortals entails an appreciation of the transience of life, the importance of valuing our lives and the lives of others and our ultimate dependence on God.

Yes, this knowledge can be frightening: but it is at the root of what makes us truly human.

Angel for Shabbat