



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

ROSH HASHANA 5774 • 2013

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

September 6, 2013
Rosh Hashana - Day 2

Adam's Apple



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart 5774 Enter the Heart”*

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Adam's Apple: Lessons From A Popular Myth

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ABSTRACT

Among the better known events that took place on the first Rosh Hashana 5774 years ago is the single most momentous experience that changed the course of all of history – Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge and were banished from Paradise.

This episode reveals for us an astonishing and powerful lesson about the nature of good and evil, our choices and responsibility on Rosh Hashana, and how we can return to Paradise – something the human race has been seeking to do for millennia.

As its name attests, the Tree of Knowledge was a tree, but what kind of tree?

Popular myth has it that it was an apple tree. In truth, there are four other opinions about the type of tree it was – fig tree, etrog tree, grapevine, and a stalk of wheat.

What is most fascinating is that the nature of the tree – the apple myth vs. the four other opinions – reveals two radically different views of good and evil: the dualistic non-Jewish view and the unified Jewish view. Indeed, the four opinions demonstrate four unique takes on this issue!

Filled with humor and anecdotes, this sermon opens our eyes to the Torah's profound and revolutionary insight concerning evil and transgression, and how we are meant to use this insight to grow as we embark on a new year.

As we celebrate the collective birthday of the human race and revisit and relive our original ancestors' challenge not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, we derive many lessons in dealing with the Tree in all its modern-day manifestations. But beyond that we hear one resounding message: We do not live in a dualistic universe. Evil has no independent power. It is in our complete and utter control to overcome any adversary and negative force, within or without, and transform it into good.

ADAM'S APPLE: LESSONS FROM A POPULAR MYTH

1. Debate (Humor: 1 of 3)

Happy Rosh Hashana! *Gut Yom Tov!*

You heard it said, "Two Jews, three opinions." Jews love to debate – with each other and even with themselves.

Naturally, the rabbi's sermon is often the subject of debate (or butt of a joke, as it were). You know:

- I loved what the rabbi said / I hated what the rabbi said.
- The rabbi put me straight to sleep / Nah, it took at least five minutes for the rabbi to put me to sleep.
- I know that joke he used / Really? His delivery was so bad I wouldn't have recognized that joke even if it were my brother.
- He said the same thing last year / Last year we had a different rabbi.

Debate is just what Jews do because debate is integral to the Jewish condition. (Or perhaps debate is the Jewish condition.) Moses debated with God; the people debated with Moses. The Talmud, the encyclopedia of Jewish thought, is a cornucopia of debate.

The way I see it, debate is the ultimate whetstone upon which to hone the sharpness of mind, to cultivate wisdom, to lend perspective. You disagree? Well, case in point!

2. Disputation (Humor: 2 of 3)

All flippancy aside, there was a period in Jewish history when debate wasn't such a pleasant thing. Debate was an euphemism for persecution.

In the Dark Ages, one of the methods the Christians used to denounce the Jewish religion was to call for a public debate – known as a disputation.¹ The entire city was invited to view a spectacle of a rabbi and a priest arguing their respective interpretations of scripture.

The rules, of course, were rigged. If the priest won the debate, all the Jews had to convert to Christianity or be expelled. If the rabbi won the debate – Whoops! We will debate again next week. The judges of the debate were, as you can guess, predominantly Christian.

Also, the rabbi was only permitted to respond to the priest's interpretations and allegations, not bring any of his own. Thus, it was like the guy that asks, "Hey, Bill, when did you stop beating your wife?" From the outset, the priest set an accusatory tone and the rabbi was at a major disadvantage.

Therefore, whenever possible, the Jews would try to avoid these public debates.

Once it happened that the Jewish people of a certain European community couldn't get out of a public debate – the date was set and that was it. They were told that, if they did not show up, they would be chased from their homes and would never again be allowed to set foot within a hundred miles of the city.

What to do? The rabbi, a sincere man surely, was no Torah genius and, even if he had been, he had no wish to confront a venom-spewing priest and a cross-bearing, fire-and-brimstone-breathing crowd.

The people were at a loss. They were about to enact a fast and a day of Psalm-reading and mourning, when suddenly an *alte yiddele*, a little old Jew said, "Don't worry my bruders un shvesters, I vill go un make dis machlokes mit dem evil galach, I vill go debate mit dem cross-eyed priest."

The people thought he was crazy. He didn't even speak Latin, only Yiddish! They told him that he would lose the debate before the second sentence was spoken.

¹ Possibly the most famous disputation was that in which Nachmanides participated in Barcelona in 1263. For details see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disputation_of_Barcelona

But, he said: "If I don't go, we will lose the debate even before the first sentence is spoken." With no choice or alternative, the community acquiesced and the old Jew walked up to the podium with the entire Jewish community trembling in fear.

As Divine Providence would have it – or perhaps the priest thought this would throw the Jew off – at the very last minute it was announced that the debate would be a silent one; only motions and props would be allowed, but no words.

Picture it: The crowd of Christians is in a tizzy. The priest is foaming at the mouth. The little old Jew is shaking in his socks.

This, my friends, is how the debate went:

3. Disputation Cont. (Humor: 3 of 3)

The priest and the Jew sat opposite each other for a full minute before the priest raised his hand and showed three fingers. The Jew looked back and raised one finger.

Next, the priest waved his finger around his head. The Jew pointed emphatically to the ground where he sat. The priest then brought out a communion wafer and a chalice of wine. The Jew pulled out a ripe apple. With that, the priest stood up and said, "I concede the debate. This old Jew man has bested me. The Jews can stay."

Later, the Christian community gathered around the priest, asking him what had happened. The priest said, "First I held up three fingers to represent the Trinity. He responded by holding up one finger to remind me that there was still One God common to both our religions. Then I waved my finger around me to show him that God was all around us. He responded by pointing to the ground to show that God was also right here with us. I pulled out the wine and the wafer to show that God absolves us of our sins. He pulled out an apple to remind me of our belief in original sin. He had an answer for everything. What could I do?"

Meanwhile, the Jewish community crowded around the old Jew, asking what happened. "Vell, first he said to me (holding up three fingers), 'You Jews have got three days to get out of here.' So I said to him (holding up one finger), 'Not one of us is going to leave.' Then he told me (waving a finger around his head) the whole city would be cleared of Jews. So I said to him, (pointing to the ground) "Listen here, Mr. Priest, we stay right here!"

"And then?" asked a woman.

"Well, who really knows?" said the white-haired *zaidy*. "He took out his lunch, so I took out mine!"

Talking about lunch and wafers and wine and apples gets the mouth watering and the mind thinking. Sometimes by looking at the interpretation of another religion we can come to better appreciate our own.

4. The Apple Tree (Alternative Opening)

There is a popular Christian myth that when Eve gave Adam the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, she gave him an apple. Hence, the expression Adam's Apple – no kidding!²

But the Book of Genesis says nothing like it – indeed, it does not name the tree. Jewish sages have four opinions what it was: a grapevine, a fig tree, a stalk of wheat, an etrog tree. (Michelangelo actually followed the Jewish view in depicting the Tree of Knowledge as a fig tree in his famous painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.³)

Even more astounding is that this myth is intertwined with another distortion – the popular Christian view of original sin.

² See *The Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* and the 1913 edition of *Webster's Dictionary*, referring to an ancient belief that a piece of forbidden fruit was embedded in Adam's throat. Others suggest that Adam's Apple is based on a mistranslation of the original Hebrew (see the Wikipedia entry on Adam's Apple) but not one that negates the apple myth.

³ See *The Sistine Secrets: Michelangelo's Forbidden Messages in the Heart of the Vatican*, by Benjamin Blech and Roy Doliner (Harper Collins, 2009).

And now you must be thinking: Why are we talking about this on Rosh Hashana?

Because among the better known events that took place on the first Rosh Hashana is the single, most momentous experience that changed the course of all of history: Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge, and were banished from Paradise.

This episode reveals for us an astonishing and powerful lesson about the nature of good and evil, our choices and responsibility on Rosh Hashana, and how we can return to Paradise – something the human race has been seeking to do for millennia.

And we can learn these lessons by understanding the nature of the tree. Contrasting the apple myth against the other four opinions will reveal for us two radically different views of good and evil – the non-Jewish view and the Jewish view.

Indeed, the four opinions demonstrate four unique takes on this issue!

When we examine them, our eyes are opened to the Torah's profound and revolutionary insight on evil and transgression, and how we are meant to use this insight to grow as we embark on a new year.

5. Jewish View of Evil

The Jewish view of evil is very different from the views of other religions and philosophies.

According to the Torah concept of utter Divine Unity (*Hashem Echad*), there is no fundamental duality between good and evil. Evil is not a more powerful force than good. Evil is simply the absence of good.

Yes, evil has power, but it derives that power from us, when we succumb to its deceit.

Since a good God created the universe, at the heart of a human being and all of existence is inherent good. Yet, due to Adam and Eve eating from the Tree of Knowledge, an evil layer entered into our hearts – the evil inclination, which challenges the good inclination. The objective is that through this exercise we reveal the inherent good by exposing the deceptive myth of evil's power.

So though we humans were banished from Paradise for betraying our own innocence and purity, this is – in reality – a process of cause and effect. When we succumb to temptation and we pollute our psyches, Paradise – being innocent – cannot contain us. But this is only a temporary state. When we correct our errors, we earn our way back into the Garden of Eden.

Life, therefore, is a battle between good and evil, the *yetzer hara* and *yetzer tov*, but even as the evil inclination affects us, the divine image in which we were created remains intact, for in truth – as Maimonides says – a Jew “wants to fulfill all the commandments and eschew all the transgressions; it is only his evil inclination that presses and imposes itself on him.”

This is in stark contrast to the Christian belief in original sin, which holds that the sinful act of eating from the Tree of Knowledge damned man for all eternity. And since man post-original sin is considered an evil creature, some otherworldly remedy is required. (This remedy is known as the wine and wafer, but a synagogue on Rosh Hashana is probably not the most appropriate place to elaborate on such edible delights.).

Now we can understand as well the misconception that the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil was an apple tree. This is the traditional non-Jewish view, which, most uncannily, reflects a duality in existence and the idea of original sin, which is diametrically opposed to the Jewish view of unity, as reflected in the four opinions on the Tree of Knowledge.

6. The Talmud Source

First, let's begin with the root of the apple tree myth? The Torah doesn't spell out what type of tree it was, so where does the apple idea come from?

It seems to come from the Talmud which says:

⁴Rambam, *Mishne Torah*, Laws of Divorce, end of chapter 2.

What is meant by, *As the apple tree among the trees of the wood*,⁵ why were the Israelites compared to an apple tree? To teach you: just as the fruit of the apple tree precedes its leaves, so did the Israelites give precedence to “we will do” over “we will listen.”⁶

This is what the Talmud is teaching us: At Mount Sinai, the Jewish people were married to God,⁷ in a total loving union. They were therefore “compared to an apple tree, to teach us that just as the fruit of the apple tree precedes its leaves, so did the Israelites give precedence to “we will do” over “we will listen,”

When there is duality and two things are not inherently connected, the only way we can join them together is by first listening and learning the instructions before following them. But at Sinai, the Jewish people were already joined as one with God. Therefore, they already intrinsically knew and were committed to everything that God wanted of them. So they naturally put their fruit (their actions) ahead of their leaves (listening and understanding).⁸

And, of course, we know that Sinai was the remedy and cure for the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge.

⁵ Shir Hashirim 2:3.

⁶ Shabbat 88a.

⁷ Mishne, Taanis 26b.

⁸ See *Shabbat* 88b (in the discussion following the lesson from the apple/etrog tree): There was a certain Sadducee who saw Raba engrossed in his studies while the finger[s] of his hand were under his feet, and he ground them down, so that his fingers spurted blood. “You rash people,” he exclaimed, “who gave precedence to your mouth over your ears: you still persist in your rashness. First you should have listened, if within your powers, accept; if not, you should not have accepted.” Said he to him, “We who walked in integrity, of us it is written, ‘the integrity of the upright shall guide them.’ But of others, who walked in perversity, it is written, ‘but the perverseness of the treacherous shall destroy them.’” Rashi explains Raba’s reply: “We followed God with trust, the way those that love each other behave, and we relied on Him that He would not mislead us with demands we could not live up to.” In other words, when there is inherent love and unity between man and God, one precedes actions (fruits) before study (leaves), in contrast to a dualistic philosophy, which dictates that one first understand before committing. It’s also interesting to note that the one who challenged Raba was most likely a gentile (since there were no Sadducees in Raba’s time, the word Sadducee is probably a censor’s substitute for gentile). Some suggest that he was probably a Manichean, an adherent of the dualistic religious system of Manes, a combination of Gnostic Christianity, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and various other elements, whose basic doctrine consists of a dualistic view of the world, dividing things into either good or evil, light or dark, black or white, involving no shades of gray a conflict between light and dark, with matter being regarded as dark and evil.

7. The Apple Problem

There is only one problem here, and it's a very big problem. The Tosafot, a commentary on the Talmud, points it out: "One need not be a farmer to know that the fruits of an apple tree do not precede the leaves but vice versa." So what, then, is the Talmud saying?

Replies the Tosafot:

The Hebrew word *tapuach*, apple, can also be translated as etrog,⁹ the citron fruit made famous by the Holiday of Sukkot. (You know, the lemon on steroids). The fruit of the etrog – not the apple – does indeed precede its leaves, as the Tosafot explains, "The etrog dwells on its tree from year to year, while its leaves shed and new leaves grow each year."

Thus, it is not the apple tree whose commitment to the fruit precedes its commitment to the leaf,¹⁰ but rather it is the etrog tree. And it is the etrog tree, not the apple tree, to which the Jew is compared.

8. Christian Misinterpretation (Humor)

This is not the first time Christianity misinterpreted a word to dire consequences:

Have you heard about the new monk who arrives at the monastery and is assigned to help the other monks in copying the old texts by hand. He notices, however, that they are copying copies, and not the original books.

So, the newly-arrived monk goes to the old abbot who runs the monastery to ask him about this. He points out that if there was an error in the first copy, that error would be continued in all of the other copies. The abbot says, "We have been copying from the copies for centuries, but you make a good point, my son."

⁹ Tosafot brings proof from the Targum on verse 7:9 in *Shir Hashirim*, which translates "the fragrance of your countenance like [that of] apples" as "the fragrance of the etrog."

¹⁰ This can perhaps also explain our custom of dipping an apple into honey on Rosh Hashana, signifying a blessing for a sweet year, emphasizing that we need to sweeten the apple (which symbolizes duality).

Since the new monk has got him to thinking, the abbot decides to go down into the cellar with one of the copies to check it against the original. Hours later, nobody has seen him. Finally, the other monks go downstairs to look for him. They hear sobbing coming from the back of the cellar and find the old abbot leaning over one of the original books crying. They ask what's wrong.

"The word is *celebrate* not *celibate*."

Perhaps the apple myth was based on a misreading of this Talmud, confusing the opinion that the Tree of Knowledge was an etrog with an ... apple.¹¹

Whether this theory is sound or not, whether someone consciously misread the etrog as an apple, one thing is certain - unconsciously the change from etrog to apple remarkably reflects the fundamental difference between the unified view, and the dualistic view of existence.¹²

9. Without Tosafot

Reading the Talmud without Tosafot can makes us think of the wrong type of tree! A tree whose leaves precede its fruit - say an apple tree.

But this leads to a dualistic and disjointed relationship with God, in which the leaves must precede the fruit. In other words, "Because I am not one with God I must listen first (leaves) to what God says and only then can I act (fruit). As opposed to a unified relationship, in which I can produce fruit even before listening to the instructions (leaves), where the whole tree from leaf to fruit to seed is one.

¹¹ Some say that the source of this misconception is that the Latin word *mālum*, meaning "evil," was associated with *mālum*, another Latin word, borrowed from Greek, meaning "apple."

¹² It reminds me of this story: On the Upper East Side of NYC lived an assimilated Jewish man who was now a very militant atheist. But he sent his son Morris to Trinity School because, despite its denominational roots, it was a great school and completely secular. After a month, the boy came home and said casually, "By the way, Dad, I learned what Trinity means! It means 'The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.'" The father could barely control his rage. He seized his son by the shoulders and declared, "Morris, I'm going to tell you something now and I want you never to forget it. Forget this Trinity business. There is only one G-d... and we don't believe in him!"

This is fine. Until I act wrong. Then, because I am not one with God, my wrong action, or sinful deed, creates an irreparable rift, a rotten apple.

10. One Tree, Four Opinions

Now that we have established that the forbidden fruit was not an apple, we have to ask – what was it? [As noted, Jews love to debate. And what type of fruit tree was the Tree of Knowledge is no less a debate.]

The Talmud offers the following opinions: ¹³

The tree from which Adam ate – according to R. Meir – was a grapevine, for nothing brings woe upon man like wine, as it says, *“And he drank from the wine and got drunk.”*¹⁴

R. Nechemia said it was a fig tree, for the thing itself that decimated will rectify, as it says, *“And they sowed fig leaves.”*¹⁵

R. Yehudah said it was wheat, for a child does not know how to call its father and mother until he has tasted wheat.¹⁶

The Midrash¹⁷ cites these three opinions and then adds a fourth:

R. Abba of Akko said it was an etrog tree; for this is what is written, *“And the woman saw that the tree-wood was good...”*¹⁸ if you go search which tree's wood is eaten just as its fruit, you will discover this only with the etrog tree.

Each of these four opinions highlights another aspect of the Torah's take on good and evil – all emphasizing the non-dualistic approach, and that evil is the absence of good, not a force in its own right, contrary to non-Jewish opinions.

¹³ Talmud, Berachot 40a and *Sanhedrin* 70b.

¹⁴ Bereishit 9:21.

¹⁵ Ibid. 3:7.

¹⁶ Thus wheat is associated with knowing - the Tree of *Knowledge* of good and evil.

¹⁷ Bereishis Rabba 15:7.

¹⁸ Ibid 6.

The sin of eating of the Tree of Knowledge was not that the tree was inherently evil. Rather, the sin was in man's relationship to the Tree. And the four opinions highlight four different problems with how the human being relates to the Tree of Knowledge.

11. Grapevine: Timing plus Maturity

According to R. Meir, the Tree of Knowledge was a grapevine. Commentaries¹⁹ write that if Adam and Eve would have but waited a few hours, until the sun set, they would have squeezed these same grapes which were forbidden to them and with the wine of these grapes they would have made Kiddush and sanctified the Shabbat.

Ask the great wine connoisseurs of the world, what's the greatest sin you commit when drinking the finest of wines? And they'll say the worst thing you can do is to not allow it to mature. The finer the wine, the deeper its potential, and the more patiently, the more sensitively one must deal with it.

Sin, as the Torah sees it, is when the potential for the most divine wine – the most divine vine – is not realized. It's like having a \$1000 bottle of Bordeaux and opening it a year early and then gulping it down in one swallow.

This is how Adam and Eve erred. Not in their wanting to taste from the Tree of Knowledge but in tasting from it when both the tree and they were immature.

And this type of premature consumption leads not to an intoxicating and holy experience but to an inebriating and incapacitated state where one cannot operate heavy machinery or drive a vehicle.

¹⁹ *Shach Kedoshim* 19:23. *Likkutei Torah Kedoshim* 29a.

12. Fig Tree: Decadent Indulgence

According to R. Nechemia, it was a fig tree. Fascinating. The Book of Genesis²⁰ states that when Adam and Eve ate of the fruit, their eyes were opened, and they saw that they were naked, so they sowed fig leaves to cover themselves.

Remember now, where were Adam and Eve? They were in a garden. And a garden by definition is resplendent with a plethora of trees. Which begs the obvious question: Of all the trees in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve found it imperative to use the one tree that was the source of their demise from which to manufacture their garments? This borders on the incomprehensible!

Ah, but this is R' Nechemia's take on good and evil, righteousness and sin: "For the thing itself that decimated will rectify." From the very matter which may seem to pull us down comes the very material that also lifts us back up even higher than before.

The Hebrew word for fig, *t'aina*, can also be read as *taiva*, which means "indulgence."²¹ Instead of listening to the Creator of the world, Adam and Eve listened to their own subjective yearnings.

The Hebrew word for sin, *aveirah*, literally means "detour," taking a turn off the healthy path and maybe getting lost on some unfamiliar road. This is called eating from the Tree of Knowledge, exiting the highway and traversing a pot-holed wasteland.

And then what happens? Your eyes are opened and you realize that you are suddenly naked! You are self-conscious – your deepest, purest parts are suddenly exposed. And you are embarrassed. You are conscious of your dissonance.

So what is the first thing a good Jew does? He takes the very thing that caused him to veer off the highway in the first place, the proverbial fig tree, and turns that fig tree into holy garments, garments that now fashion a whole new perspective on things.

Because now that he realizes he is naked and pure, he must shield that innocence and purity.

²⁰ Genesis 3:6-7.

²¹ See Ben Ish Chai on the verse.

13. Wheat Stalks: Knowledge, Refinement and Sophistication

R. Yehudah is of the opinion that the tree was a stalk of wheat.²²

The Talmud states that only when a child is able to eat wheat does it have the knowledge how to call its mother and father, and therefore the Tree of *Knowledge* – the ability to know – must have been wheat.

The Midrash expresses it a little differently and, dare we say, more humorously: “About the man that is dimwitted, they would say that he has never eaten wheat bread.”

The process of bread-making is highly sophisticated and requires technical knowledge. From planting and cultivating the wheat, to harvesting and separating stalk from kernel, to grinding into flour and mixing with cultured yeasts, to allowing to rise, bake, etc. – the making of bread represents a highly skilled and knowledge-based endeavor.

In spiritual terms, the art of bread-making reflects the purpose of creation: to refine and transform the raw matter of this universe into an edible entity ... to recognize that “not by bread alone that man lives, but by all that comes out of God’s mouth.”²³

What then was the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge? The sin was eating raw wheat from the Tree of Knowledge and not turning and elevating it into a glorious loaf of bread.

Animals eat stalks of wheat while they are still attached to the ground. Human beings, who are gifted with the knowledge and sophistication to cultivate matter into something greater than its organic sum, would be considered odd if they ate the way animals did.

Indeed, the human was charged with not simply indulging in raw stalks, but to refine and transform matter into spirit.

Adam and Eve ate of the tree, of the wheat, but did not turn that wheat into breads, into challahs, into sanctified loafs of heaven.

²² Though wheat stalks are not a tree, they grew as tall as the cedars of Lebanon, therefore they were considered trees (Midrash *ibid*).

²³ Deuteronomy 8:3.

Thus, again, the difference between a righteous act and one that is wrongful is the difference between eating grain and baking bread – the difference between using knowledge and sophistication to improve our world, or scrounging our blessings.

14. Etrog Tree: Duality versus Unity

And finally we come to the fourth opinion, the etrog.

“And the woman saw that the tree-wood was good...” if you go search which tree's wood is eaten just as its fruit, you will discover only with the etrog tree.

Not only is the etrog fruit itself good and delicious, but even its wood is delicious. Consistent with what we discussed earlier, the etrog is a unified fruit, which dwells on its tree from year to year, and its fruit precedes its leaves.

What is the message here?

We, Jews, who are represented by the etrog, believe in the integral Divine Unity, that everything in this world – from fruit to wood – is part of one reality, and its purpose is to be refined and elevated to serve God.

There are times that we refine and elevate the world – and reveal the divine unity – through engaging in it or consuming it. Other times we do so by not consuming it. By following God's commandments and refraining from the temptation to taste the divine unity (symbolized by an etrog), we are equally fulfilling God's will, just as we do when we perform a mitzvah. Complete divine unity does not mean that everything goes; it means that everything is doing what it's supposed to be doing and not doing what it's not supposed to be doing.

The sin here was that Adam and Eve were meant to elevate the Tree of Knowledge by *not* consuming it – maybe because the Omnipotent God had a deeper purpose for the Tree than mere consumption – but they ate and consumed that which wasn't meant to be consumed.

It would be like someone giving you diamonds and, instead of you wearing them, you ate them. That would be wrong. And distasteful. Literally.

And, as a matter of fact, in just a few days we will celebrate the holiday of Sukkot by blessing, uniting and shaking the lulav and etrog. We are not told to eat the etrog; rather, we are commanded to hold it and shake it to the four corners of the world. Sometimes, by tenderly holding something we are perfecting the world much more than by consuming it.

And this demonstrates the non-dualistic divine unity – that sees the good in both positive action and refraining from action. Duality sees good in the positive, but not necessarily in the negative, or in avoidance. Unity says: You serve divine goodness by both doing what's right, and by not doing what's wrong.

This is huge. And delicious – not eating from the Tree of Knowledge is just as much a mitzvah as eating an apple dipped in honey. Sweet!

15. Four Lessons

We now understand how these four opinions on the nature of the Tree of Knowledge teach us four lessons on the nature of good and evil. Also we learn how each of us will be tempted by these four types of challenges in our lives, and thus must do what we can to pre-empt the temptations that our personal “Tree of Knowledge” poses.

We also derive from this the antidote how to repair the sin of the first man and woman, who were created on Rosh Hashana, and how to return ourselves and the world to Paradise.

As we celebrate the collective birthday of the human race and revisit and relive our original ancestors' challenge not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, we derive many lessons in dealing with the Tree in all its modern-day manifestations.

But beyond that we hear one resounding message: We do not live in a dualistic universe. Evil has no independent power. It is in our complete and utter control to overcome any adversary and negative force, within or without, and transform it into good.

This is one of the most empowering messages we take away from Rosh Hashana.

16. The New Year

As we begin a New Year, our Jewish attitudes to good and evil allow us to start afresh with a renewed sense of hope and purpose.

[Yes, we Jews love to debate. But one thing is definitely not up for debate and it is something we can all agree upon:]

5774 years to the day that Adam and Eve ate from the tree – and we all know this:

We Jews have no original sin.

Unless original sin is short for original sincerity, original synergy, original synchronicity!

Ketiva v'Chatima Tova!