



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Bereishit

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September 28, 2013

Bereishit

When No is Greater than Yes



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

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ABSTRACT

What is the single most famous and impactful event in all of history, and one that gave birth to most of our major industries?

This event, documented in our Torah reading today, is the sin of Adam and Eve. The first human beings ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and were banished from Paradise – a calamity which caused man to have to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow (hence the birth of agriculture and industry), and brought on many other changes that shape our lives today.

Man had one mitzvah to keep but he couldn't resist the temptation. But why did God have to tempt him? Why did He plant that tree in the first place if He didn't want man to eat from it?

One seemingly inexplicable Torah verse in the Book of Genesis answers this fundamental question. Accompanied by powerful anecdotes and contemporary examples showing the power of restraint, this sermon presents a tremendous lesson for how we should conduct our lives and reveals a remarkable tool for dealing with temptation.

We usually associate success with action, aggression, initiative, movement. In our acquisition and commodity-driven world, power seems to rest in the hands of those who “go out and get it.” But, in truth, the greatest and most enduring things in life – love, truth, soulfulness, Godliness – can only emerge through doing nothing. Indeed, the lost art of restraint holds the key to life's greatest success.

**WHEN NO IS GREATER THAN YES:
THE SURPRISING VIRTUE OF TEMPTATION**

1. An Event That Changed History

What single event gave birth to most of our major industries?

Anyone?

Hint: It is described in this week's Torah reading.

No, anyone?

Okay, I'll tell you.

This game-changing event was Adam and Eve eating from the Tree of Knowledge.

And these are the major industries it gave birth to:

- The garment industry – only after eating from that tree did Adam and Eve sense their nakedness and covered themselves with fig leaves,¹ creating the first garment ever.
- The hard labor industry – now man had to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow.²
- The agriculture industry.
- The marriage therapy industry – so much of which seems to revolve around the blame game as in “he/she made me do it.”
- The guilt industry – also known as psychiatry.
- The maternity industry – including pain management during labor.³
- The endless variety of industries involved in child-rearing.⁴

¹ Genesis 3:7.

² Genesis 3:19.

³ Genesis 3:16.

⁴ Genesis 3:16.

- The travel industry – had we not been banished from Paradise, we would have no need to seek exotic vacations.
- And probably lots more. (Please see me afterwards if you have any thoughts...)

2. The Most Famous of All Dramas

This most famous event and drama of all time is documented in this week's Torah portion. And when we read it, we see an amazing thing: In just 26 verses the Torah tells the tale – revolving around four central characters: God, man, woman, and the snake (well, five if you count the Tree) – which includes the entire narrative of the human condition: the battle between good and evil, temptation, innocence lost, betrayal, seduction, envy, ego, sexuality, rationalization, justification, accusation, finger-pointing, etc.

This is high drama to end all dramas. Virtually every story written since then has been a takeoff on or a variation of the original Tree of Knowledge Affair.

3. Relevant Messages

We can therefore assume that this single most impactful event in history carries many relevant messages for us, both in its general narrative and its details and nuances.

Our constant struggle with good and evil does not need much elaboration. We all know in our hearts and in our daily experiences the challenges we face and the choices that confront us. We are keenly aware of the forces that continuously tempt us.

But I would like to focus on one less-well known aspect of this narrative that presents a tremendous lesson for how we should conduct our lives, and reveals a remarkable tool for dealing with temptation.

The lesson is simple: Sometimes the best action is no action at all. Sometimes the best thing we can do is to do nothing.

We may think that doing nothing is just that: doing nothing. But we shall soon learn that sometimes doing nothing is actually more than doing something.

4. To Eat or Not to Eat?

Like say, not eating ... right?

We all know the basic story:

God commanded Adam and Eve not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. But when seduced by the serpent, they disobeyed God, and they were banished from the Garden of Eden.

Looking closely at the verse describing that famous command, we find something quite unsettling. It begins like this:

God gave the man a commandment, saying, *"M'kol etz ha'gan, achol tochol - from every tree of the garden, eat shall you eat."*⁵ Or, less literally, *"From every tree in the garden, you may definitely eat."*

From this verse is it clear that man can and should eat from every tree in the garden. Indeed, this is consistent with an earlier verse which quotes God as saying, *"Behold, I have given you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the earth, and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit. It shall be to you for food."*⁶

From this, we would naturally assume that no tree is off limits. But then we read:

*"And from the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil, do not eat, for on the day you eat from it, you will definitely die."*⁷

⁵ Genesis 2:16.

⁶ Genesis 1:29.

⁷ Genesis 2:17.

Let's not forget that each word in the Torah is precise. So, if God was forbidding Adam and Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, why did He first tell them to eat from every tree in the garden?

If you want to ensure that someone will not do something, you don't begin by saying "you can do everything," then adding, "and you should not do so and so." This only leaves room for confusion. God just as easily – and more clearly – could have said "eat from the other trees of the garden, but not from the Tree of Knowledge!"

So why didn't He?

5. The Purpose of Temptation

The answer, my friends, lies in the reason why God created temptation in the first place.

The big question is: Why does God want to tempt man? What benefit is there in this? Is this a game? Is it worth the risk that man may not withstand the test and fall?

To answer these questions, we need to briefly go back to the reason why God created man. As the Torah states:

God created man in His own Divine Image and then "placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to guard it," or put another way "to serve and to protect."⁸

Thus the human being is a partner with God in creation. Man is a gardener of sorts, charged with refining and elevating existence, and transforming the material world into a divine garden.

What is the meaning of "to work it and to guard it?"

"To work it" refers to the positive mitzvahs that we do, and "to guard it" refers to the negative mitzvahs that we refrain from doing.⁹

⁸ Genesis 2:15.

⁹ See Targum Yonatan on the verse. Zohar 27a. II 165b.

In other words, there are two ways through which we achieve the mission of caring for the garden. One is by engaging in positive activities, partaking of the material world, eating from its fruits, and using the resulting energy to bring more kindness and virtue into the world. "To work it" means to take matter and turn it into spirit – to transform the material part of our lives into good deeds. For example:

- To take wood and turn into a table upon which we study Torah and around which we welcome guests.
- To take an animal hide and convert it into parchment for a Torah scroll, *tefillin* and a *mezuzah*.
- To take wool and use it for *tzitzit*.
- To take a flame and light with it Shabbat and holiday candles.
- To take money and give it to charity.

In all these ways we are sanctifying the mundane. The gardener is planting flowers and seeds, nurturing and watering them, ensuring that they blossom into beautiful things.

The second way is "to guard it." To protect and ensure that no negative elements – no weeds – invade the garden. This is accomplished not by action, but by restraint – by refraining from the negative and not yielding to temptation.

6. The Power of Saying No

Now, ostensibly, we may think that the former is greater than the latter. After all, how can we compare doing something to refraining from doing something?

Building a structure or planting a seed seems far superior to preventing weeds from sprouting. "To work" seems far more significant than just "to guard."

In truth, however, that is not the case.

Think of it this way: What requires more energy – to do a mitzvah or to resist temptation?

The Talmud tells us: “One who sits and refrains from a sin is considered as if he did a mitzvah.”¹⁰

Why is that? Because resisting temptation takes as much – and often more – energy than doing a mitzvah.

7. Argument Between Two Sages: Yes or No?

The Midrash relates a strange argument between two sages:

How did the Jews respond to the do’s and don’t’s of the Ten Commandments they heard at Sinai?

R’Yishmael said: “To the yeses they replied yes and to the nos they replied no.”

But R’ Akiva said: “To the yeses they replied yes and to the nos they replied yes.”¹¹

In other words, both sages agreed that, when they heard the positive mitzvahs (like remembering Shabbat or honoring parents), the Jews answered “yes, we shall do.” Their disagreement was about the negative mitzvahs (like do not kill, or do not steal).

R’ Yishmael held that when they heard “thou shalt not” they said “no,” we will not do that. R’ Akiva disagreed and held that here too they said “yes,” we will not do as you say.

But that seems like semantics. What really was the substance of their argument?

¹⁰ Talmud, Kiddushin 39b.

¹¹ Mechilta, Yitro 4.

The basis of their argument was that they had two different perspectives on what the primary focus should be in a negative mitzvah: R' Yishmael (who was a high priest) said that a negative mitzvah is just that – a “no.” R' Akiva (who was a child of converts, and who came to Torah later in his life) said that we have to see the “yes” even in the “no” of a negative mitzvah – to recognize the awesome, invisible power of restraint.

8. The Power of Action

We usually associate success with action, aggression, initiative, movement. In our acquisition and commodity-driven world, power seems to rest in the hands of those who “go out and get it.”

But, in truth, the greatest and most enduring (and often most subtle) things in life – love, truth, soulfulness, Godliness – can only emerge through doing nothing. Indeed, the lost art of restraint holds the key to life’s greatest success.

Anything subtle requires standing back and allowing its power to emerge. You can’t force it. You need to absorb it instead of trying to acquire it.

The white space on a page is more critical than the words in black ink. The silence of a wise person can teach us much more than his words. At the time, his words may carry more weight, but over time we can appreciate that what he didn’t say was even more important than what he did say.

And what requires more energy: For a wise person to speak or for him to remain silent?

Winston Churchill once famously concluded a long letter to a friend: “I apologize for not having the time to write a shorter letter.”

It takes a lot more effort and time to express something in a few words than in a long discourse.

The true art of writing, speaking and communication is brevity. Long and drawn out lectures and essays often reflect a lack of mastery of the topic. Ernest Hemingway once said that when you truly know your subject, you are brief.

We see from all these examples that restraint is in many ways more powerful than action.

A practical lesson from all of this – and you can try this at home: Next time you have a fight with your spouse try a new approach. Instead of continuing the fight, let go. Very often you will get what you want faster and better.

9. Two Types of Sustenance

Now we can understand why God began by instructing the first human beings: “*M’kol etz ha’gan, achol tochol* – From every tree of the garden, you may definitely eat.”

Eating in Hebrew (*achol tochol*) means being sustained. There are two ways in how we can “eat” and be sustained from fruits of a tree: 1) By actually eating from the fruit. Or, 2) By *refraining* from eating. Both generate energy and in so doing, both sustain us.

God spells out the second way of being sustained: “And from the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil, do not eat.” The way you will be sustained from this tree is by resisting temptation. As explained, restraint can produce far more power than action.

This also answers the fundamental question: If God did not want them to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, why would He plant it in the Garden of Eden in the first place? Why tempt them? And why tempt us – through our challenges?

Temptation elicits from us more positive energy than does doing a good act. So, we see that in the process of us fulfilling our missions as gardeners of the universe, “to guard” is at times more powerful than “to work.”

10. Renewed Hope

This also gives each of us renewed hope and confidence in our own power. If success were defined only by the number of activities we do ... if our achievements were measured solely by their firepower – by how much impact they create – then those with the largest arsenals will be far greater achievers than others. But if success is defined just as much by the things we avoid, then the greatest achievers may be the ones with the greatest restraint.

In this world we measure success by the things we can see and count. We don't appreciate as much the invisible strength – often superhuman strength – that is invested in refraining from doing something wrong.

When we see people succeed, we take notice of what they obviously did right. But we cannot see what they did not do wrong, what things they avoided. The real secret to success is not merely knowing what to do, but knowing even more what *not* to do.

11. Entering the New Year

A Chassidic saying goes: “*Vi m'shtelt zich avek Shabbos Bereishis, azoy geit es a gantz yor* – The way we establish ourselves on Shabbat Bereishit that's how the entire year goes.”

As we enter the New Year may we learn the appropriate lesson from the trees in the Garden of Eden. For, lest we forget, there were many of them, including the important two – the Tree of Life, and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. And their energies continue to impact our world today.

For God placed each of us in our respective “garden,” our corner of this world, with the implicit purpose “to work it and to guard it.”

Aside from the Tree of Life in the middle of the garden, and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, we are blessed with many other trees “that are pleasant to look at and good to eat,” which translate into the many gifts and opportunities that come our way.

We are charged to eat from them ... to derive sustenance from every “tree” that we encounter. But from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, we may not eat.

Though every tree has purpose and every one can sustain us, we must be aware that there are two ways to gain sustenance in the garden: 1) “To work it” – by actually eating and consuming the fruit of the Tree of Life and other trees; and 2) “To guard it” – by refraining from eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Our sustenance comes from both efforts – from what we consume and what we don’t consume.

So as we return to our normal lives after this rich holiday season, we carry the knowledge that – in every interaction and encounter – we have the opportunity to create wonders: not only from the things we do, but even more from the things we refrain from doing.

12. Dealing with Temptation

This offers us a powerful tool for dealing with temptation:

When tempted by anything, let’s tell ourselves: “God has sent me an opportunity to achieve something remarkable and extraordinary – the power not to eat from this tree. And that effort will sustain me more than the effort I would exert in doing positive things.”

We often think only of the positive things that come our way – such as Divine blessings and acts of Divine Providence. But the story of the Tree of Knowledge teaches us something else ... that even a negative experience – a temptation – is a gift from above, eliciting from us the power of restraint, the strength not to succumb.

And God knows that to avoid temptation we often need far greater strength – sometimes even superhuman strength – than that needed to do a good deed.

So there we have it: The virtue of temptation!

Next time you face any temptation welcome it as a gift which will help you see what you are made of and which will help you draw out your deepest strengths.

Only we humans have this power. Not the angels, not the souls in heaven. Only those living on earth.

The Talmud¹² relates that Moses rebutted the angels who claimed that the Torah should be given to them in heaven and not to the inferior humans on earth. He said: “Let us open the Torah, and see what it says. ‘I am your God who took you out of Egypt.’ Did you then descend into Egypt? ... And it says, ‘Do not kill, do not lust, do not steal.’ Do you then have jealousy, do you have an evil inclination, do you have a temptation to steal?’ The angels had to admit they did not. Only man was privileged with such challenges.

13. Conclusion

One of the most beautiful things about Judaism is its balance. Even as we revel in an intense holiday season – the renewal of Rosh Hashana, the sanctity of Yom Kippur, the joy of Sukkot and Simchat Torah – we know and appreciate that these holidays are not just an escape from the mundane. They are channels of energy that empower us to return from their oases to our daily routines, which have now been infused with new strength and fortitude.

Armed with the resources we gathered during the holidays, we begin the year with hope in new possibilities, knowing that we can achieve anything we set our minds and hearts to achieve.

¹² Talmud, Shabbos 88b-89a.

This *Shabbat Bereishit* is like a bridge between the holy days and the regular days. As such, its theme offers us tremendous lessons in dealing with real life, beginning with the battle between good and evil.

We learn from the story of the Tree of Knowledge to face any challenge and temptation that comes our way, and to tap into our inner reservoirs to come out stronger than ever.

All you have to do is believe in yourself. And to know that God believes in you. Why else did He send you to earth?

Gut Shabbos and good year. May you be blessed in all ways, materially and spiritually, with the best of health and much *nachas*. Amen.