

## Notes on Genesis 3

### The problem of our human nature

“And God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him...”  
(Genesis 1:27).

The “tzelem Elokim,” the image of God embedded within man, is his capacity to make moral decisions, even without access to reason. To intuit what is right - i.e. the conscience.

Some of the rabbis said this is reflected in the seven laws given to Noah, the Noachide Laws: Do not deny God. Do not blaspheme God. Do not murder. Do not engage in illicit sexual relations. Do not steal. Do not eat from a live animal. Establish courts/legal system to ensure obedience to the law. (Six of the seven laws are exegetically derived from passages in Genesis, with the seventh being the establishing of courts.) The Talmud says they are a binding set of laws for the "children of Noah" – that is, all of humanity.

### But man can override his conscience.

When Adam and Eve ate from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they “become like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5)

The ability to discern between good and evil was already present, or was initiated by God’s commandment, both to dress and keep the garden (a positive command) and not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil ( a negative command).

Rather it was Adam and Eve’s deciding for themselves, rather than following God’s definition of good and evil.

“Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:22).

The Midrash (Ber. R. 21:5) elaborates: R. Akiva explained that it means that God set two paths before him, the path of life and the path of death, and he chose the other path (i.e., of death).”

The path of the tree of knowledge *seems* to lead to the desire of our heart - filled with growth, endeavor, and independence – nevertheless, it is a path in which we are willing to throw away our lives to live in freedom.

### ‘As Gods’ = Determining Good and Evil for Ourselves

Deuteronomy 29:13 - That he may establish thee to day for a people unto himself, and that he may be unto thee a God.

The requirement for the people was to acknowledge God as God, instead of themselves.

Only one place where God is defined - Genesis 3:5 - they became like God, knowing (or deciding, determining) good and evil.

Deuteronomy 29:19 - "And it come to pass, when he heareth the words of this curse, that he bless himself in his heart, saying, I shall have peace, though I walk in the imagination of mine heart, to add drunkenness to thirst ..."

shēriyrwuth - "imagination" in KJV. - Both a good and bad sense. "firmness, truth" of heart. Bad sense = hardness, stubbornness, twisted (from a root that means turned, twisted as an enemy, hostile)

This is described as leading to or equivalent to "serving other gods."

Deuteronomy 29:25 - For they went and served other gods, and worshipped them, gods whom they knew not, and whom he had not given unto them.

Idolatry stems from coveting, which switches our moral compass out of God's hands and into our own, or society's or the media's, etc.

The problem seems insoluble

Later, God said, "The intention (yetzer) of man's heart is evil from his youth." (Genesis 8:21)

The yetzer hara only has power over someone regarding that which he has seen. (Sotah 8a)

Indeed, the Zohar (35b) teaches that, until Adam looked at the Tree, the snake was not even allowed into the Garden, let alone to be able to approach Chava to convince her to eat. Thus, it was Adam's looking at the Tree that began the slippery slide from G-d-given greatness to the depths of sin.

"The heart and the eyes are the spies of the body; that is, they lead a person to transgress: the eyes see, the heart covets, and the body transgresses." (Rashi, Bamidbar 15:39)

### **Self-effort**

What has been the Jewish rabbis' solution for man?

To defer moral arbitration back to God. We do this by stopping to choose what is right and wrong by what seems good to us, to stop walking in the "firmness of our heart" – but rather to choose what is right and wrong by what God says through His Torah.

The Gemara (Shavuot 9b) compares evil with the darkness covering the light at the new

moon - God thus acknowledges the tragic consequences of evil, but can do little more than offer a sacrifice in atonement. The reason is because if God were to do more to end evil, He would be removing from Man the very task He entrusted to him, the very thing which makes Man a creation special from the animal. Man is to be a partner in creation, to complete creation, to bring perfection through his own efforts. We are to hope in the help of the Lord, but we are to act ourselves – “Hope in the Lord, and be strong and courageous of heart, and hope in the Lord” (Psalm 27:14).

The Talmud (Kiddushin 30b) says - My children! I created the evil inclination, but I [also] created the Torah, as its antidote; if you occupy yourselves with the Torah, you will not be delivered into its hand.

Gemara (Ber. 33b), “Everything is in the hands of heaven except for the fear of heaven.”

Later rabbinical thought indicated there was also a “good inclination” within man.

The Zohar (Toledot 144b) explains, “Should a man be minded to purify himself and to observe diligently the precepts of the Torah, the good prompter (yetzer ha-tov) who is associated with him will overpower the evil prompter (yetzer ha-ra), who will then make peace with him and become his servant... then God makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.”

In Genesis, the Serpent is the personification of the “Yetzer Hara” speaking to Eve.

The Zohar (Bereishit 35b) relates that after Adam sinned, it was none other than Jacob who came and wrested the power taken by the serpent – the yetzer ha-ra incarnate. Yaakov, whose life of trials and tribulations is seen by the Zohar (Vayeishev 179b) as nothing but a life-long battle with the yetzer ha-ra, is the paragon of struggle and victory over the yetzer hara. Indeed, the Zohar (Toledot 144b) explains that Yaakov received the name Israel for struggling and prevailing with – not against – God. Yaakov prevailed over the yetzer ha-ra by putting his trust in God and doing His will, and thus God aided him in prevailing in his battles. In this, Jacob would be a type of Christ.

[Solomon Schechter, in his *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology*, writes: The Hebrew noun yetzer derives from a root Y-TZ-R, meaning 'to form, frame or fashion'. However, when used with reference to the mind, it may mean 'imagination', 'device', 'purpose', 'drive', 'urge' 'inclination' or 'desire'.

The earliest rabbinical references to the yetzer hara indicated it was *only* evil, bent on transgression. The yetzer then is not a part of the human psyche or soul at all, and not a metaphor for it, either. In fact, it's more like an impish demon that invades the human person to entice it to sin. — *Demonic Desires: "Yetzer Hara" and the Problem of Evil in Late Antiquity*]

**But the evil inclination always seems to win**

First Jesus and then Paul explained that man has failed and will continue to fail at this

struggle against his “yetzer hara” on his own.

Jesus told the Pharisees: “Did not Moses give you the law, and yet none of you keepeth the law?” (John 7:19)

And Romans 7 is the cry of everyone without Christ.

### **“Carnally minded” vs “Spiritually minded”**

So what’s the solution?

Paul’s personification of sin sounds like the yetzer hara: “Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me.” (Romans 7:17)

Adam is not able to overcome the evil inclination. But Adam died on the cross with Christ. (Romans 6)

Galatians 2:20 - I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I that live, but Christ living in me. That life which I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself up for me.

Then Romans 8 shows the outworking of this - the Law written on the very hearts of believers, which leads to being “spiritually minded” as opposed to “carnally minded” - Paul’s terms for the good inclination and the evil inclination.

This is only accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit when we “reckon ourselves dead” on the cross with Christ.

Ezek. 36:26-27 - “And I will also give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit within you. And I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give to you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you shall keep My judgments and do [them]”

Also - Compare - the eating of fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil - with eating the manna, and the unleavened bread of the aphikomin at Passover / Lord’s Supper.

### **Resources:**

Torah.org

<http://torah.org/torah-portion/perceptions-5759-tetzaveh/?print=print>

The Divrei Navon Library - Essays on Jewish Thought

<http://www.divreinavon.com/library.xml>

