

Parshat Bereshit

Snake Charming!

It is difficult to talk about a world that pre-exists our own. We are never sure what we can really know about it. The world of Bereshit is such a world. We are looking at a world of the Garden of Eden, pre-flood, pre-sin - an existence where “The voice of God breezes through the garden with the daily winds (3:8).” When reading through the verses of Bereshit one frequently feels that one fails to grasp many elements of the story. How exactly was Eve formed from Adam? What is the “flow” that “would well up from the ground and water the whole surface of the world (2:6)?” What is a Tree of Knowledge? Do snakes speak?

The stories of Bereshit are clouded in mystery and obscurity. In our parsha, the story of the Snake's enticement of Eve, we are not going to be able to fully explain all elements. There are certain phrases which almost defy explanation. (The RaDaK says, “This parsha is very confused according to rational thinking, but in the hidden Torah (the Kabbala) it is all clear.) We will try to begin an analysis and hopefully the Parsha will become a little clearer for us. Please look at this shiur as a start, an entry into a deep, complicated parsha. Certain questions will remain unanswered. I leave it to you to keep learning.

CHAVRUTA STUDY

1. Read and study BERESHIT 2:25 TO 3:24 .

The main section that we will concentrate on is 2:25 to 3:11 but the story in its entirety will give valuable background.

Ask your own questions and think a little BEFORE reading on.

2. NAKEDNESS:

Note the use of the word ‘ARUM’ in both 2:25 and 3:1.

* How does it translate in each place?

* Why is the same Hebrew word applicable to such different meanings? Is there a connection between the two meanings?

* At the end of the story, what was it exactly that caused Adam and Chava to realize that they were naked? Why were Adam and Chava embarrassed about their bodies? What changed ?

What makes humans (in all cultures) cover certain parts of their bodies (especially the sexual organs)? Why do animals not have a need to cover themselves?

3. WHAT IS THE NACHASH?

* Is it a regular animal; the snake that we know? If it is, do

snakes speak? If it is not, then what is it?

* See 3:14 and RASHI there “Al gechoncha telech” What does this imply about the animal? See also the Ibn Ezra 3:1.

* The SEPHORNO (see if you can study the entire sephorno on 3:1) opens his explanation to the story with the following :

THE SNAKE : “It is the Satan. It is the Yetzer Hara (evil inclination)” (Quote from Baba Batra 16b); maximum damage with minimum visibility.

What is the Snake according to Rashi and Ibn Ezra? What is it according to Sephorno?

* What are the advantages of one understanding over the other ?

* What are the implications of each explanation?

4. THE CUNNING OF THE SNAKE.

Looking through the pesukim, try to understand by which methods and arguments, the snake managed to convince Chava to eat from the tree. (An excellent article on this topic is by Nechama Leibovitz : “The Serpent- the evil impulse. Anatomy of Temptation” in her book, “Studies on Bereshit”)

5. Did the tree of knowledge of Good and evil have any intrinsic power of it's own?

* Compare the wording in 2:9 to 3:6. Was the tree any different from other trees? Did Chava see something in this tree that was different to other trees in the garden? What unique element of the tree was she attracted to?

THE SHIUR SECTION:

THE NACHASH

Two central questions present themselves when we read this parsha. The first - What is the Nachash? Is it just an animal? Then why does it speak and tempt people? If it is something else more abstract, then why talk about a snake in very physical terms, crawling on the ground?

The second relates to the tree itself. It is more of a philosophical question, found in the Rambam's Moreh Nevuchim (2:1). How can it be that by transgressing God's word and eating from the forbidden fruit, we attain the greatest gift that mankind possesses; the ability to distinguish between good and evil? It would seem to be a blessing, not a sin! And why would God want to prevent us from having that ability in the first place?

And one further related question - can eating a fruit really change my personality, my mindset like that? Was this fruit magical?

A REGULAR ANIMAL

The Ibn Ezra is of the opinion that the Nachash was a snake. It was a rather strange snake; it had legs and it spoke, but it was a snake nonetheless.

“And it seems to me that we should take this parsha literally. The Nachash spoke and walked upright and He who gave intelligence to man instilled it in the snake. The passuk testifies that the snake was the most ARUM of all the animals, but obviously not on the level of man. The word ARUM means intelligent (chacham), that it can act with cunning.”

The Ibn Ezra bases himself on the fact that the curse later relates to a very physical snake: “Because you did this, more cursed shall you be than all animals...on your belly you shall crawl and you will eat dirt all the days of your life and I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers. They shall strike at your head and you shall strike at their heel.” Apparently, this is a real snake. The type that we know as a snake! It also seems that at one time, previous to this incident, the snake had legs that are now somehow removed to leave the snake slithering on his belly.

The obvious problem with this explanation is that we don't really experience a snake talking. Moreover, it would seem that man alone has the power of speech and intelligence. If the snake could speak and convince Chava, then in what way was man unique in his 'divine image'? Then the snake is really human! In addition, we do not see a statement in the curse that talks about the power of speech being denied or intelligence lessened.

THE YETZER HARA

The Sephorno explains:

“It is the Satan. It is the Yetzer Hara (evil inclination. Baba Batra 16b.) – (The usage of the metaphor of a snake alludes to) maximum damage with minimum visibility, for we often give something a name reminiscent of something similar. A king may be called “a lion” and enemies are described in the Bible as “Northern snakes” (Jer 8:17). The Yetzer Hara, which induces sin, is similar to a snake in that it causes enormous damage despite its invisibility and it gains little benefit for itself. ...the power of desire is activated by the imaginative faculty which feeds its illusory physical pleasures... THE SNAKE WAS MORE 'ARUM' THAN OTHER ANIMALS - that is to say that they (Adam and Chava) had very powerful imaginative faculties, more than any other being, propelling towards them with great force images of pleasure, to the seat of desire.... thus the snake,

which is really the imagination ... is the woman inside her own mind.”

This is a far cry from Rashi and the Ibn Ezra. Here, the entire discussion is taking place within the head of the woman. We are witnessing a struggle between a powerful desire to eat from the tree and a religious conscience trying to fight that desire. We are given a window in this Parsha into an epic battle of the soul.

EMPHASIS ON THE PERMITTED

Let us, for a few moments, work with the Sephorno. Let us ask ourselves how the imaginative powers lead the faculty of desire to make the move to sin.

Before we even analyse the conversation between Chava and the Nachash, we must first establish what we really know about the command not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge.

God's command is phrased in the following way:

“Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat (“achol tochal”) but as for the tree of good and evil you must not eat of it, for when you eat from it you will become mortal.” (2:16-17)

The command emphasises what one CAN eat, granting the freedom to eat anything in the garden with a double reinforced expression - “achol tochal”, and giving the impression that everything is allowed: “mikol etz hagan”. In contrast, the restriction of eating from the tree of knowledge is given in a simple expression of limitation, not nearly as powerful as the first expansive statement. The stress of the command clearly lies in what one CAN do rather than that which one CANNOT do.

ROUND ONE

And so, let us turn to the temptation of the Nachash. His opening line (3:1) is a strange one. How do we translate that line? Most commentators translate it as:

“Did the Lord really say ‘You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?’”

In the Hebrew, that translation is not entirely accurate. To my mind, it is the first part of a question left unfinished:

“Even though God said you shall not eat from all the trees of the garden....”

What this line achieves can be seen from Chava's response (3:2):

“We may eat of the fruit of the other trees of the garden. It is only the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said ‘You shall not eat from it or touch it lest you die.’”

What has happened here? What exchange of ideas has taken place in this conversation?

In the command (2:16) God had stressed the permitted - *achol tochal* – as if to say, "everything is at your disposal." The Nachash employs a powerful and persuasive technique. He starts from an assumption (that we and Chava know is false) that ALL is forbidden. What he has succeeded in doing is shifting the focus from that which MAY be eaten to that which is FORBIDDEN. Suddenly God's word is on the defensive. Suddenly God's instruction appears restrictive and oppressive. Note how Eve stresses that the tree of knowledge is "in the middle of the garden"; the spotlight is cast upon the restricted. Eve even adds the clause that by touching it, one will die. The text never states this. She has somehow, subconsciously (or consciously) expanding the scope of the "forbidden." She is clearly on the defensive (- maybe she even cut in to the Nachash's words and that is why his sentence is unfinished! -) and reacts by magnifying and intensifying the restricted and minimizing the permitted.

In a sense, she has come round to the Nachash's point of view. Even at this stage she has in some way accepted his fundamental assumptions, his perspective, even though she is unwilling to accept his conclusion.

ROUND TWO

The Nachash responds to Chava's defensive answer by suggesting that:

“You won't die. God knows that on the day you eat from the tree, your eyes will be opened and you will become LIKE GOD determining good from evil.”

The Nachash, having already changed Chava's perception of the situation to see the restrictions as central, now suggests that God is restricting their eating from the tree because he is worried of what they might become. In Rashi's words, by eating from the tree, you too can become “creators of worlds.” The attraction of “becoming like God” with the supremacy and power that accompanies that image is one that man finds irresistible. It is not for nothing that the ancient Pharaoh's perceived themselves as Gods.

The temptation has now reached its peak. Eve is starting with the impression that everything is restricted, and even the source of that restriction is dubious, a defensive move from God to protect his own position from outsiders. How exciting it would be to have "God knowledge." To be an unlimited being!

KNOCKOUT

“And the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes and that the tree was desirable as a source of wisdom; she took of the fruit and ate.” (3:6)

In truth, this tree was no different to the other trees in the garden. They are all described in the same way (2:9-10):

“The Lord planted a garden in Eden...and the Lord caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food”.

Compare the two pesukim. There is basically no difference between the tree of knowledge and the other trees in the garden! The difference is that now Chava feels that the tree of knowledge “was desirable as a source of knowledge”. The difference is psychological. The power of the imagination is at work here. Now no inhibitions stand in her way.

She eats the forbidden fruit.

A SNAKE WITHIN US

According to the SEPHORNO, this is all taking place in her mind. She is wondering, deliberating, about the forbidden tree. What prompts such thought? How does Chava come to a point of direct confrontation with the Divine command?

Maybe, it is the simple basic childish rebellion within us. The side of us that doesn't like being told what to do and how to act. Adam and Chava had but a single command. Only one. But it was exactly the object of that command that became the object of Eve's desire. She managed to convince herself that she was victimised, God restricting so much. And then she managed to persuade herself that the command was simply God protecting Himself. And in the end, the forbidden became so enticing that no obstacle remained standing in the path of sin.

The ABARBANEL follows a similar path suggesting that the entire discussion was within Chava's mind and conscience. However, he suggests that the first prompt was seeing a snake crawl up the tree of knowledge and eat from the fruit. That made her re-think the seriousness of the prohibition of eating.

NAKEDNESS AND EMBARRASMENT

The ShaDaL - Rabbi Shmuel David Luzzato (1800-1865 - Italy) writes about Adam and Chava's embarrassment in the following way:

“Humans are embarrassed about their nakedness, because they know good and evil

and act freely, by personal choice, rather than through natural instinct. Because a human being is motivated by his visual sense, the sight of nakedness arouses thoughts and desires in his heart. The person who sees it is embarrassed by what he is thinking and the person who is viewed naked is embarrassed by what others may think when they see him. A man and wife are not embarrassed with each other when both are thinking sexually but even they experience a certain shyness at other times when they are involved in other normal activity. Adam and Chava did not have this sense of good and evil and thus did not experience a feeling of embarrassment.”

Apparently before the sin, Adam and Chava looked at their bodies much in the same way as animals. The sin changed them. How?

One might explain that the command not to eat from the tree was a test. Eating from the tree did not actually change man. What changed man was the fact that desire could now lead to a defiance of God. Transgression became a possibility. Breaking the rules became an option. And now that defying God is possible, man decides morality according to his own thinking. Man, by eating from the tree introduced a new dimension into his moral thinking that had not existed previously. Until now, all that existed was God’s will. Now man’s will can take centre stage. The snake, the Yetzer Hara, became internalised and our moral sense became relative.

From now on, we do not understand where the limits lie in an absolute sense: what is absolute good and what determines evil. Instead we try to mediate a path between mind and desire.

In a world of absolutes one can live in Gan Eden. There, God is present in full intensity. There, values have a true absolute worth. But Adam and Eve are exiled sent out from the garden. Man and woman are exiled from the Garden to a relative world. It is there that we still live, muddling through, with the snake that lives on inside us all.

Written 5767