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Blame the Tree

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1.

THE EULOGY

In our *parshah*, the verse says,¹ “If a man has a *אָפֶקֶת*, a sin for which he is sentenced to death, *וְתִלְיָתָּהּ אֹתוֹ*, you shall hang him on a tree. As known,² in his eulogy of the Ramak,³ the Arizal⁴ expounded this verse:

If a man has a אָפֶקֶת for which he is sentenced to death: Meaning, he is lacking (“אָפֶקֶת” in the sense of “lacking”)⁵ a reason for being judged to death, for he did no wrong; why should he die? וְתִלְיָתָּהּ אֹתוֹ, you shall attribute it⁶ to the Tree — on account of {the sin of} the Tree of Knowledge for which Hashem decreed {that humanity would be subject to} death — for this reason, he shall die.

A cursory reading of this exposition indicates that its point is similar to the teaching of our Sages,⁷ “Four died as a result of the snake’s advice.” Just as these four people never sinned but died only because of the “snake” — as a result of the sin of the Tree of Knowledge (initiated by the snake’s advice),⁸ “death was decreed upon all the descendants of Adam”⁹ — the same holds true in the case of the Ramak. His death was only a result of the “Tree (of Knowledge).”

We can posit that the Arizal not only expounded this verse as a corollary of the teaching that “four died as a result of the snake’s advice,” but the Arizal shared and propounded a **new** idea.

¹ *Devarim* 21:22.

² *Yaaros Devash*, vol. 2 (from a lecture delivered in the communities of Altona, Hamburg, and Wandsbek, “lecture 2,” at the end [in the Warsaw ed., 126c]); *Chida, Nachal Kedumim*, on our *parshah* on this verse, and in the book, *Devarim Achadim*, lecture 20 (107d).

³ {R. Moses Cordovero, known as “Ramak,” lived c. 1522-1570. He was one of the foremost 16th-century kabbalists in the land of Israel, and an older colleague of the Arizal.}

⁴ {R. Isaac Luria (1534-1572), also known by the acronym “Ari” or “Arizal,” was born in Jerusalem and died in Safed. One of the greatest Kabbalists of all time, he founded a new school in Kabbalah – the so-called “Lurianic Kabbalah” – the basis of almost all mystical works that followed him. He studied with Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, whom he succeeded as the leading mystic of Safed.}

⁵ {The Hebrew word “אָפֶקֶת,” generally translated as “sin,” also connotes a lack, a deficiency, or missing a target, as in: *הִקְטִיף אֶת הַמִּצְוָה*.}

⁶ {The Hebrew verb “לְתַלֵּיתָ” means “to hang,” and it also means “to attribute (a cause).”}

⁷ *Shabbos* 55b; *Bava Basra* 17a.

⁸ Rashi on *Shabbos* and *Bava Basra*, *ibid*; Rabbeinu Gershom on *Bava Basra*, *ibid*.

⁹ Rashi on *Bava Basra*, *ibid*.

2.

BAD AND NOT ACTUAL BAD

We will understand the novelty of this teaching by prefacing with an analysis of the difference between these two thoughts: The Gemara states that they “died as a result of the **snake’s advice**.” The Arizal (expounded and explains the phrase) “וְלִיָּהּ אֲתוּ — you shall attribute it to the **Tree**.” This is a difference (not only in terminology but also) in **meaning**:

“The snake’s advice” — when the snake cajoled Chava into **eating** from the Tree of Knowledge — refers to **wickedness, advice to perform a sinful action**. “You shall attribute it to the **Tree**” (which the Arizal addresses) refers to the medium through which Adam sinned, but the tree itself does not symbolize a shortcoming.¹⁰ On the contrary, according to *pshat*¹¹ — as Rashi explains¹² — the Tree was a fig tree. It was one of the species for which the land of Israel is **praised**.¹³ Additionally, the tree was called “the Tree of **Knowledge**,” that is, the tree was an instrument of knowledge.¹⁴ And even the sin precipitated by the tree — Adam eating of the Tree of Knowledge (according to our Rabbis, etc.) — was possible only {during the short window of time} (in the three hours) before Shabbos.¹⁵

In other words, the Arizal speaks about the causal chain of sin. Furthermore, it was a very indirect and a distant antecedent. He does not speak about the **sin** of the Tree of Knowledge, which brought about the death decree. Instead, he speaks of the object (the Tree) that created the **possibility** for death

¹⁰ Specifically, according to what is explained (see Rav Chaim Vital’s *Kuntres Eitz HaChaim*, ch. 10) that Adam “**needed** to eat” from the Tree of Knowledge after (or while) eating from the Tree of Life. “And then... on the contrary, **it** refines them” (the outside aspects).

¹¹ {The plain meaning of Scripture. Rashi says in his commentary to *Bereishis* 3:8: “I have come only to explain the plain meaning of the Scripture.” However, there are many levels and depths of interpretation of the Torah, Rashi adopts a straightforward approach.}

¹² *Bereishis* 3:7.

¹³ *Devarim* 8:8.

¹⁴ *Targum Onkelos* on *Bereishis* 2:9; *Berachos* 40a; et al.

¹⁵ *Shach on the Torah* on *Vayikra* 19:23, s.v., “*od unetatem*” (42b); see *Likkutei Torah*, beg. of “*Kedoshim*”; *Or HaTorah* (*Vayikra*, vol. 1), “*Kedoshim*,” end of p. 143; Rav Chaim Vital’s *Kuntres Eitz HaChaim*, ch. 10; et al.

(if the person would eat it [when the tree was in the state of good and bad]¹⁶ — “you will surely die”).¹⁷

Put differently (based on the wording of the midrash):¹⁸ When Hashem created the world, He planned for the phenomenon of death. (For this reason, “He created the Angel of Death on the **first** day.”) However, as a result of {His sublime scheme, alluded to in the verse} “awesome in deed toward humanity,”¹⁹ Hashem arranged events so that the decree of death would be actualized through {the failing of} humans. For this reason, Hashem set up Adam with the great test of the Tree of Knowledge by planting “every tree, pleasant to see and good to eat” in the Garden of Eden, including “the Tree of Knowledge....”²⁰ The actual decree came about as a result of these machinations.

3.

HASHEM’S PLAN

This explains the difference between these two ideas: They “died as a result of the snake’s advice,” and, “attribute it to the Tree.”

The idea that they “died as a result of the snake’s advice,” which the Gemara — the revealed part of Torah — discusses, refers to the concept of death as it exists **in actuality and in a revealed sense** (in “the revealed part of Torah”).

In contrast, the idea to “attribute it to the Tree,” which the Arizal introduced when speaking of the Ramak — both of whom were known for

¹⁶ {Once Shabbos would begin, the tree would become wholly good.}

¹⁷ *Bereishis* 2:17.

¹⁸ *Midrash Tanchuma*, “*parshas Vayeshev*,” sec. 4. {Chassidus explains that to reveal Hashem’s presence in the lowest aspects of creation and reveal the highest G-dly source, Hashem created evil and death. The evil introduced into the world through the sin of the Tree of Knowledge was all part of Hashem’s plan. Hence, the word, עלילה, in the verse, translated as “{in His} act,” is expounded as meaning “libel.” I.e., “Hashem brought a libel upon humanity,” signifying that Adam’s sin was preordained; it was a crucial and inevitable part of the ultimate plan for creation. Despite the apparent divine entrapment, it is axiomatic that Adam still made his choice freely.}

¹⁹ *Tehillim* 66:5.

²⁰ *Bereishis* 2:9.

revealing the *sod* dimension²¹ of Torah, the **inner dimension** of Torah — refers to the inwardness of this concept. In light of the inwardness of this concept, this {fall of humanity through sin} is connected (not with the snake’s advice, but) with the **Tree** — the test of the Tree of Knowledge, which **Hashem** orchestrated for Adam according to His blessed Will and plan for Creation.

4.

SECRETS OF THE TORAH

In a deeper sense, these two ideas (“the snake’s advice” and “attribute it to the Tree”) relate to two types of *tzaddikim*:

They “died as a result of the snake’s advice” refers to *tzaddikim* who die as a consequence of sin. However, there is a type of *tzaddik*²² who is unaffected by the snake’s advice. For this sort of *tzaddik*, the only cause of death is that “you shall attribute it to” — it comes about as a result of — “the Tree.”

The explanation is as follows:

The Alter Rebbe, in *Torah Or*,²³ explains that they “died as a result of the snake’s advice” for the following reason: Even though these four individuals were utterly righteous, there remained in them “some trace from the pollution of the snake²⁴ that they could not completely remove.” The Alter Rebbe then continues to explain the significance of this idea in a person’s *avodah*: The pollution of the snake refers to the “haughty spirit that is a by-product of a person’s nature... he can see himself, and he knows what he lacks, or he knows that something is beneficial for him.” That is, he feels himself.

²¹ {*Sod* is one of the four levels on which the Torah can be interpreted: *Pshat*, *Remez*, *Drush*, and *Sod*. The term *sod* means *secret* or *mystery*. It involves esoteric interpretation of Scripture, and is the focus of Kabbalah.}

²² Note *Chiddushei Aggados Maharal* on *Bava Basra* 17a, which states that *tzaddikim* who died as a result of the snake’s advice are on a lower level than the various groups of *tzaddikim* mentioned earlier in the Gemara. Over these *tzaddikim*, neither the evil inclination, the Angel of Death, nor the worm and the maggot have any sway.

²³ End of *parshas Mishpatim*.

²⁴ See *Shabbos* 146a and the sources cited there; *Zohar*, vol 1, 52b, 126b; vol. 2, 193b.

In other words, “the snake’s advice” means that the sin of the Tree of Knowledge caused a deficiency in the *tzaddik* — a fault with fatal consequences. However, the *tzaddik* is not responsible for this deficiency, G-d forbid; instead, the **snake** brought this pollution into the world.

This explains the advantage of the explanation “attribute it {the death of the righteous} to the Tree” over the reason, “they died due to the snake’s advice”:

The blemish caused by sin can only affect a Jew externally. His inner self always remains whole “and faithful to Him even while the sin is committed.”²⁵ This integrity is undoubtedly true of the internal aspects of the soul, which are beyond the whole idea of sin.²⁶

On this basis, we can also clarify something about the pollution caused by the snake due to the sin of the Tree of Knowledge. The snake’s pollution can affect a Jew only externally, not his inner self.

Therefore, when the internal dimensions of a Jew’s soul shine forth **in a revealed way**, to the extent that they take him over externally, a person can’t die “as a result of the snake’s advice.”

This is what the Arizal says: “*If a man has a נִפְלָא, a sin for which he is sentenced to death. Meaning, he lacks a reason for being judged to death,*²⁷ for he did no wrong” — we can posit that the Arizal here also means to include the “reason for being judged to death,” stemming from “the advice — the pollution of the snake” —

{Arizal continues:} “You shall attribute it to the **Tree.**” The reason **this** person dies is only because {of the Divine mystery alluded to in the verse} “awesome in deed toward humanity,” because (through the Tree of Knowledge) Hashem introduced death into the world.

²⁵ *Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*,” ch. 24.

²⁶ See *Zohar*, vol. 3, 16a, 13b.

²⁷ {I.e., there are no grounds to justify a death-sentence.}

We can also appreciate how this idea is connected to the Arizal and the Ramak. The focus of both their lives, as discussed above, was revealing the hidden dimensions of the Torah. Revealing the secrets of the Torah is associated with the concealed aspects of the soul,²⁸ which are beyond being affected by “the snake’s advice.” As is known,²⁹ the inner dimension of the Torah is the Tree of Life, which is greater than the Tree of Good and Evil (the Tree of Knowledge).

5.

EVERY JEWISH PERSON

“Who is the person and where is he, who would dare presume”³⁰ that he is anywhere near the spiritual levels of the Arizal or the Ramak? Nevertheless, from the Arizal’s era onward, “it is a mitzvah to reveal this wisdom.”³¹ And since we have been told about **this** idea, presumably, “a minute portion and particle” of this is relevant to every person. This is similar to what is said about Moshe Rabbeinu:

And although {one may ask}, who is the man and where is he, who would dare presume in his heart to approach and attain even a thousandth part of the degree of love felt by {Moshe}, “The Faithful Shepherd”? Nevertheless, a minute portion and particle... illuminates the community of Israel in every generation.

In our context, **the contrary** is true: The idea that a person could die “as a result of the snake’s advice” — that he has no other sin or deficiency, only that he cannot wholly remove the pollution of the snake — applies to the level of the soul that the pollution can affect, namely, the external dimensions of a person and his discernable capabilities. This type of virtue and perfection that extends (even) to a person’s **external** faculties is reserved for unique individuals. It is not attainable by everyone.

²⁸ See *Zohar*, vol. 3, p 73a.

²⁹ *Zohar*, “*Raya Mehemna*,” “*Naso*” (124b), quoted and explained in *Tanya*, “*Iggeres HaKodesh*,” epistle 26.

³⁰ {All quotes in the paragraph:} *Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*,” ch. 44.

³¹ *Tanya*, “*Iggeres Hakodesh*,” ch. 26, 142b.

Conversely, the idea of “a sin for which he is sentenced to death... he is lacking a reason for being judged to death,” refers to an innocence that is linked to the “concealed dimension of the soul”³² (where the snake’s counsel has no impact), and obviously, that is linked to the soul’s essence. This untouchable innocence is possessed by **every Jew**. This is because the deepest part of any Jew — no matter who he is and in what circumstance he finds himself — is beyond any pollution of sin. This is true to the extent that it could manifest openly and affect him in a literal sense, even influencing practical halachah.

We see this in a case where a Jew firmly declares that he will not comply with the judgment of a Jewish court to offer a sacrifice. In such a case, the court pressures the defendant until he **says**, “I want to.” Even in such a scenario, the Torah of **Truth** says that the person’s {ostensibly coerced} compliance expresses his actual will.³³

In our times, **it is a mitzvah** to publicize this wisdom. Thus, everyone is instructed and empowered to achieve this goal by first **revealing** the concealed parts of his soul. This is accomplished by delving into the secrets of the Torah in a manner whereby the secrets become **known**. In this way, the person will be sustained by his study — he will grasp the Torah with his intellectual faculties³⁴ to the extent that this knowledge completely suffuses him.

When the wellsprings of the person’s soul permeate his external faculties, he will then live a life in which sinning is no longer an option.

³² {In the Aramaic original, “סתים דנשמחא.”}

³³ *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Geirushin*,” end of ch. 2.

³⁴ {In the original, “the *Chabad* of his soul,” a Hebrew acronym for the three intellectual faculties of *chochmah*—wisdom, *binah*—comprehension, and *da’as*—knowledge.}

6.

THE LESSON

The practical lesson from all the above:

We must fulfill the proviso that “your wellsprings will spread to the outside.”³⁵ We need to disseminate the **wellsprings** of the inner dimensions of the Torah so that they will be revealed “to the outside” — to every Jew — and even further “to the outside” — to the Jewish person on the lowest (spiritual) level. This is because the heart of every Jew’s soul is connected with the heart (the wellsprings) of the Torah.

Learning Torah with this Jewish person — even though to do so, we may need to translate the Torah and explain it in a style that he can understand in his present state — awakens the inner dimensions of his soul and lifts him out of his current state.

By doing this, we will nullify “our sins” (including the sin of the Tree of Knowledge), which is the **only cause** for this exile — “because of our sins, we were exiled.”³⁶ Then, the consequence of sins (“we were exiled”) will be nullified **automatically**, and Mashiach will bring the true and complete redemption. May it transpire speedily in our days.

— From a talk delivered on *Shabbos, parshas Matos*, 5741 (1981)

³⁵ {In a letter, the Baal Shem Tov recounts that Mashiach told him that Mashiach would be revealed “when your wellsprings spread to the outside,” referring to the inner dimension of Torah; see *Sefer Poras Yosef*, 128a.}

³⁶ *Siddur*, “*Amidah*, *Musaf* for Festivals.”