

The Tree of Obsessive Thoughts

Dr. Shaiya Rothberg, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

In the Guide to the Perplexed 1:2, Rambam addresses a perennial question: If eating from the tree of knowledge (*etz hadaat tov ve ra*) was a sin, why was the "punishment" knowledge of good and evil? Is this not a blessing? In a nutshell, the Rambam's answer to this question is that *to* *ve ra* in this context are less about good and evil and more about **desires** and **fears**. And *etz hadaat* was not the *tree of knowledge* but rather *the tree of obsessive thoughts*. Before eating from the tree, Adam had been a kind of Buddha, blissfully focused on divine truth. The sin of eating from the tree, and its punishment, were one and the same: Adam and Eve became enslaved to obsessive thoughts about their fears and desires. For the Rambam, this change in one's state of mind is the real exile from the garden.

This resonates with me because sometimes I feel enslaved to my own fears and desires. At these times, the earth seems cursed for my sake, as if life consists of wringing momentary satisfaction from thistles and thorns. But only a *change of attitude away*, I can be happily absorbed in something profound. It's like the Rambam said: Being inside or outside of paradise is all about my state of mind.

In his introductory commentary on *Pirkei Avot*, called the "*Shmoneh Prakim*" or "Eight Chapters," the Rambam teaches that the purpose of human existence is to embody *the holy spirit* or *ruach hakodesh*, which also means *divine inspiration*. He teaches that progress on this path requires gradually extracting ourselves from being absorbed in fears and desires. We need to inch back towards the consciousness of the first human before the fall.

In my experience, again following the Rambam, an effective practical method for moving beyond *the tree of obsessive thoughts* towards *the tree of life* is Talmud Torah. However, it doesn't work for me if I just read the texts. I need to get my body involved. First, I need to physically feel how the primordial *ruach* that once hovered over the deep waters at the dawn of creation flows in and out of me like the tide, filling my body with life. The more I become absorbed in that rhythm, the more fears and desires recede from the foreground of my mind.

After *breath* comes *voice*: When I imitate generations of Jews by chanting the texts out loud, something moves in me which remains untouched by rational analysis. It intrigues me that voice has this effect because the symbol *kol* or voice occupies the middle rung of the symbolic ladder that connects my mind to God according to Kabbalah. After *ruach* and *kol*, comes study. But it must not be study aimed at becoming a guy who knows the text. That's just another desire. I feel *ruach hakodesh* in Talmud Torah only if I approach the text like Adam once approached the world: Appreciation without egotistical attachment; Studying Torah for her own sake - *Torah Lishma*.



TORAH SPARKS

Rosh Hashana 5779

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Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh

Rabbi Andy Shapiro Katz, Conservative Yeshiva Director of Engagement

This year, the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem planned two special 4-Day Minimesters, one before Rosh Hashana and one before Yom Kippur, with learning focused around the theme: *Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh* - Embodying Holiness. The Hebrew in the title means "in my heart I will build a Tabernacle" and comes from a well-known song written by the kabbalist and poet Rabbi Elazar ben Moshe Azikri (Tzfat, 1533-1600), who also wrote Yedid Nefesh. The full text is:

In my heart a sanctuary I shall build, to the splendor of His honor, בלבבי משכן אבנה להדר כבודו,
and in the sanctuary an altar I shall place, to the rays of His glory. ובמשכן מזבח אקים לקרני הודו,
And for an Eternal Flame I shall take me The fire of the Akei'dah; ולנר תמיד אקח לי את אש העקידה,
And for a sacrifice I shall offer Him my soul, My one and only soul. ולקרבת אקריב לו את נפשי היחידה.

This piyut (liturgical poem) takes the Torah's story of the Israelites building the Tabernacle (literally, a Dwelling Place) in the center of their camp, and transforms it into a statement of deep personal religious commitment and passion. The altar burns with the fire of the Akeidah - the would-be sacrifice of Yitzhak - and instead of offerings of grain or animals, the poet offers God his soul.

Just as the Israelite camp, with the sanctuary in its middle, needed to remain holy for God to dwell there as they traveled in the wilderness, so to do we need to maintain personal holiness for God to dwell in our hearts.

The following is a short sampling of learning done in the Conservative Yeshiva beit midrash this past week around this theme.

We hope that it gives you a window into the activities of the yeshiva, and gives you something to read and think about over Rosh Hashana that will stimulate your mind, touch your heart, and stir your soul. G'mar Chatimah Tovah!

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Words of Torah Cannot Become Impure

Dr. Joshua Kulp, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty & Rosh Yeshiva

“In my heart I will build a Tabernacle.” The heart here means more than just the seat of emotions; it refers to my internal being, or my very soul. But Judaism tends not to split the body from the soul as does, or did, Western philosophy. “My heart” lies in my body, and when I build a Tabernacle in my heart, I am turning my body into a Dwelling Place for God as well.

The third chapter of Mishnah Berakhot refers to a prohibition of praying and studying Torah for a man who had a seminal emission (a “*ba'al kerī*”), and both the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds speak of men who would go to the mikveh every morning before praying to purify themselves from the seminal emission of the night before. The Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 22a then cites a statement attributed to R. Yehudah b. Batera, “The words of Torah cannot become impure,” and reads this statement as an objection to the custom for the *ba'al kerī* doing so. According to the Talmud, those who went to the mikveh before praying or studying actually thought (incorrectly) that they could defile the Torah!

I would like to suggest a different way of understanding both R. Yehudah b. Batera’s statement AND the custom of the mikveh-users, one which does not read them as being in conflict. Let’s assume that the Jews who went to the mikveh before praying or studying agreed with R. Yehudah b. Batera. and understood (correctly) that the words of Torah could not become defiled. Nevertheless, they realized that to build a Tabernacle in one’s body, to bring God into one’s body through study and to offer one’s body to God through prayer, means taking care of the body. When one’s body is unwell or unclean, it may place a psychological barrier for us to learn or pray. Read this way, their immersion in the mikveh was not to protect the Torah from the impurity of their body; it was to prepare their body and mind to be a vessel for Torah and dwelling place for God. The custom for men to go the mikveh on a daily basis for the most part disappeared already in the Talmudic period, but we still have, I believe, the responsibility to physically cleanse and take care of the bodies into which we were born.

But if there wasn’t really anyone who believed that bodily impurity could defile the Torah, then what is the purpose of R. Yehuda b. Batera’s statement that “The words of Torah cannot become impure?” At this time of year, focused as we are on a year of accumulated sins, we may question whether we are even allowed to learn words of Torah or speak words of prayer. R. Yehuda b. Batera is telling us that we can approach God and God’s Torah during these Yamim Noraim and every day of the year in any state we are in. Torah goes beyond the physical scroll on which it is written. It is abstract wisdom, *derekh erez*, the lens through which we view the world. No matter what we do, Torah cannot be defiled. God’s words are strong enough to withstand our faults.

Doing What is Right & Good

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Don’t steal, don’t transgress Shabbat, don’t trip up a blind person, don’t block an ox that is threshing. Don’t. Don’t. But some “don’ts” seem to be missing. There is no prohibition on foul language, no restriction on being a gluttonous and despicable person, no Mitzvah forcing your neighbor to lower the music. You get my drift, you could probably add your own favorite missing Mitzvah. Why are they not there?! Because no legal system can legislate every possible situation.

This issue bothered Ramban (Nachmanides) enough to write about it in at least 2 places. He comments on the Torah’s instruction “*And you shall do that which is right and good in the eyes of the LORD*” (Deut. 6:18) and says:

“[this verse] refers to a compromise and going beyond the requirement of the letter of the law...even where He has not commanded you, give thought as well to do what is good and right in His eyes...Now this is a great principle, for it is impossible to mention in the Torah all aspects of a person’s conduct with his neighbors and friends, and all his various transactions, and the ordinances of all societies and countries... [so after giving some legal examples] he reverted to state in a general way that in all matters one should “do what is good and right”, including even compromise and going beyond the requirements of the law.” (Translation by Chavell).

Ramban does not view compromise as a mediocre outcome, rather, compromise is the very best, it is what we should strive to reach. It is not easy. Compromise require understanding the other side without losing sight of our own needs. It means accepting that the person that is driving us crazy needs to be dealt with through respect and tolerance (and hope that he/she, too, has been studying Ramban). If we can learn to view society as a place where we strive to be wise, not right, then we will be doing that “which is right and good in the eyes of the LORD.”

At the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem we offer students of all backgrounds an opportunity to engage with Jewish texts in a dynamic, inclusive, and collaborative environment. We help students gain the skills necessary for Jewish learning and spiritual growth as individuals and in their communities in North America, Israel, and around the world.