Lesson 1

THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

Unraveling the mystery of the “Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Bad” from which Adam and Eve ate illuminates many of the questions we grapple with in our own lives. Why do we desire things that we know are bad for ourselves and for others? Why does everything we achieve require hardship and struggle? How much should we care: Is it better to be objective and true or subjective and engaged?
THE GARDEN OF EDEN AND THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE (2:8–9)

G-d Almighty planted a garden in Eden, in the east;
and He placed there the man that He had created.
And G-d Almighty made grow from the soil
every tree that is desirable to the sight and good for eating;
and the tree of life in the middle of the garden
and the tree of the knowledge of good and bad.

MANKIND’S MISSION (2:15)

G-d Almighty took the man
and He put him in the Garden of Eden
to work it and to keep it.

THE COMMANDMENT (2:16–17)

And G-d Almighty commanded the man, to say:
“Of all the trees of the garden, eat you shall eat.
And of the tree of the knowledge of good and bad
do not eat of it;
because on the day you eat of it, die you shall die.”

* Throughout this book, “G-d” and “L-rd” are written with a hyphen instead of an “o” (both in our own translations and when quoting others). This is one way we accord reverence to the sacred divine name. This also reminds us that, even as we seek G-d, He transcends any human effort to describe His reality.
NO SHAME (2:25)
15 They were both naked, the man and his wife;
16 and they were not ashamed.

THE SERPENT’S DECEPTION (3:1–5)
17 The serpent was the most shrewd of all animals. . . .
18 And the serpent said to the woman:
19 “No, die you will not die.
20 For G-d knows that on the day you eat from it
21 your eyes will be opened;
22 and you will be as G-d, knowers of good and bad.”

THE TRANSGRESSION (3:6)
23 The woman saw that the tree is good for eating
24 and that it is lusty to the eyes
25 and the tree is desirable to make wise
26 and she took of its fruit and she ate;
27 and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.

THE FIRST CLOTHING (3:7)
28 And the eyes of the both of them were opened
29 and they knew that they were naked;
30 and they sewed the leaves of a fig tree
31 and they made themselves girdles.
THE FALLOUT: PAIN OF CHILDBIRTH, THE STRUGGLE TO EARN A LIVING, AND DEATH (3:16–19)

To the woman He said:

“Multiply I will multiply your pain and your pregnancy
in pain you will give birth to children;
and to your husband will be your desire
and he will rule over you.”

And to the man He said:

“. . . Cursed is the soil on your account
painfully you shall eat of it, all the days of your life. . . .

By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread
until you return to the soil, as from it you were taken;
for dust you are, and to dust you shall return. . . .”

ADAM AND EVE BANISHED FROM THE GARDEN (3:21–24)

G‑d Almighty made coats of skin
for Adam and his wife
and He clothed them.

And G‑d Almighty said:

“Here the human has become like one of us
to know good and bad;
and now, perhaps he will send forth his hand
and he will take also from the tree of life
and he will eat and live forever.”
And G‑d Almighty sent him out from the Garden of Eden; to work the soil wherefrom he was taken. . . .

If the tree was so good to eat, and so attractive as a source of wisdom, why did G‑d withhold it from man? For G‑d is good and beneficent and does not withhold goodness from those who live wholesomely!

RABBI MOSHE BEN NACHMAN (NACHMANIDES, RANBA) 1194–1270
Scholar, philosopher, author, and physician. Nachmanides was born in Spain and served as leader of Iberian Jewry. In 1263, he was summoned by King James of Aragon to a public disputation with Pablo Cristiani, a Jewish apostate. Though Nachmanides was the clear victor of the debate, he had to flee Spain because of the resulting persecution. He moved to Israel and helped reestablish communal life in Jerusalem. He authored a classic commentary on the Pentateuch and a commentary on the Talmud.
Some years ago, a learned man asked me a great question. . . . It would appear, from a basic reading of the Torah’s words, that the human being was originally intended to be like the rest of the animal creation, without intelligence in his mind, and without the ability to distinguish between good and bad; and that Adam’s disobedience is what procured him that great perfection that is the uniqueness of the human being. . . . It thus appears strange that the punishment for his disobedience should be the elevation of man to a pinnacle of perfection that he did not previously have. . . . This is like saying that a certain person was disobedient and extremely wicked, wherefore his nature was changed for the better, and he was placed as a star in the heavens!
Figure 1.1
The Locked Box Parable
**Figure 1.2**
The Serpent’s Words: Deception or Truth?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GENESIS 3:4–5</th>
<th>GENESIS 3:22</th>
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<td>The serpent said to the woman: “No, die you will not die. “For G-d knows that on the day you eat from it, your eyes will be opened; and you will be as G-d, knowers of good and bad.”</td>
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Figure 1.3
Seven Questions on the Tree of Knowledge Story

1 How did eating the fruit of a certain tree impart “knowledge of good and bad”?

2 Why was the Tree forbidden? Doesn’t G-d want us to enjoy the gifts of life?

3 Isn’t knowledge a good thing? Why would it be a sin or the result of sin?

4 Did Adam and Eve have Free Choice before they ate from the Tree?

5 Everything the serpent said was true. So where is the deception?

6 Why did eating from the Tree cause human mortality, the pain of childbirth, and the struggle to earn a living?

7 What is the role of nakedness, clothing, and shame in the Tree of Knowledge story?
Figure 1.4
The Ten Faculties

- Binah: Understanding
- Chochmah: Wisdom
- Daat: Knowledge
- Gevurah: Fear
- Chesed: Love
- Tiferet: Compassion
- Hod: Humility
- Netzach: Ambition
- Yesod: Connectiveness
- Malchut: Receptiveness
An official-looking letter, adorned with stamps and seals, arrived at a small wayside inn somewhere in the backwoods of Russia. The illiterate innkeeper ran to find the local schoolteacher in order to enlist his assistance. As the teacher read the letter aloud, the innkeeper turned white, uttered a small cry, and fainted. For the letter contained shocking and tragic news for this simple, good-hearted man: his beloved father had passed away.
QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Does our faculty of daat help us or hinder us in making important life decisions?

Examples:

1. Who can better diagnose and treat an illness—an objective professional, or a doctor who is a close friend and deeply cares about the patient?

2. Who will do a better job at running a business—a hired genius with a PhD in business administration, or a family member who is personally and emotionally invested in the family business?

3. Which would be a better judge in a criminal case—a computer that is fed all the relevant facts and algorithms, or a human judge with feelings of sympathy for the victim and outrage toward the criminal?
This is the meaning of what [G‑d] says [after Adam and Eve ate from the Tree:] “Here, the human has become like one of us . . .” (Genesis 3:22). Meaning that in the same way that in the Supernal Oneness there is knowledge of good and bad, so, too, has man [gained this knowledge] as a result of his tasting of the Tree of Knowledge in which good and bad are commingled. But for man, this is damaging. . . .

The way that it is Above is that although the bad is also known, it remains separate and distant from the good. . . . The human being, however, is a penimi (“internalizer”): when the human being knows the bad, he becomes mixed up with it . . . and then it is extremely
difficult to separate from the bad. Rather, it is a great battle, in which “kingdom overpowers kingdom”—at times one side overpowers, and at times the other side overpowers. . . .

This is why G-d did not want that man should taste from the Tree of Knowledge. . . . G-d wanted that man should not have any knowledge at all of the bad, and that man should remain exclusively holy; as G-d did not desire to cast man into this great battle.
The intelligence that G‑d imparted to man, which is man's ultimate perfection, was given to him before his disobedience. Indeed, it is because of this intelligence that it is said that man was made in the divine image and likeness, and it is due to this intelligence that G‑d spoke to man and instructed him . . . as one does not commission animals or those without intelligence. With this intelligence, man was able to differentiate between truth and falsehood. This ability man possessed in fullness and perfection.

“Good” and “bad,” on the other hand, are subjective conventions, not objective truths . . . When speaking of
the correct and incorrect, we use the terminology “true” and “false”; regarding what is attractive or repulsive, we use the terms “good” and “bad.” . . . When man rebelled and followed his imagined desires and the pleasure of his physical instincts—as it is written, “[The woman saw] that the tree is good for eating and that it is lusty to the eyes”—his punishment was to be deprived of that objective understanding. . . . He was inundated by the subjectivity of worldly conventions, and he sank to the level of discerning in terms of “good” and “bad.” . . . Thus, it says that [Adam and Eve became] “knowers of good and bad,” rather than “knowers of falsehood and truth” or “comprehenders of falsehood and truth.”
Today, in the post-transgression reality, the evil inclination is an internal voice that speaks in the first person: “I want,” “I desire.” . . . This was not the original state of the human being. For “G‑d created man straight” (Ecclesiastes 7:29), as one who would naturally do the right thing. . . . Which is why the serpent had to come from the outside to entice man . . . with a “you” voice coming from without, rather than with man’s “I” voice, which was rooted in good.
“G‑d Almighty took the man, and He put him in the Garden of Eden, to work it and to keep it” (Genesis 2:15). “To work it”—these are the positive commandments of the Torah; “and to keep it”—these are the prohibitions.

The seminal work of kabbalah, Jewish mysticism. The Zohar is a mystical commentary on the Torah, written in Aramaic and Hebrew. According to the Arizal, the Zohar contains the teachings of Rabbi Shimon bar Yocha'i, who lived in the Land of Israel during the 2nd century. The Zohar has become one of the indispensable texts of traditional Judaism, alongside and nearly equal in stature to the Mishnah and Talmud.
QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Which path would you choose for your child?

Know that after Adam sinned and ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad, both his soul and his body became integrated with both good and bad. . . . This is the significance of that which is written (Genesis 2:17), “Because on the day that you eat from it, die you will die”—both the death of the soul and the death of the body. . . . [And] when he sinned with the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad, man caused this intermixing in all the worlds, so that there is nothing that does not include within itself both good and bad.
As a result of the sin of the Tree of Knowledge, there was a blending of good and bad. Evil existed before the sin, but then it was separated from the good. As is known, in the beginning of Creation, the domain of *kelipah* [the “husks” that conceal G-dliness] was beneath the realms of holiness. But through the sin of the Tree of Knowledge, the entire world became a mixture of good and bad: the bad is mixed into the good, and the good is mixed into the bad, to the extent that there is no good without some bad in it, and no bad without some good in it.
QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Are we better off or worse off as a result of Adam and Eve’s deed?

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

What life lessons can we take from the story of the Tree of Knowledge?

KEY POINTS

1. The plain meaning of the Torah’s text and its inner mystical “soul” are interrelated. The many questions, mysteries, and dilemmas posed by the stories of the Torah are resolved when we understand the stories’ mystical significance. The mystical meanings also show us how these stories are applicable to our own lives in the here and now.

2. The Torah’s account of the “Tree of Knowledge” presents us with many perplexing questions. How did eating the fruit of a certain tree impart “knowledge of good and bad”? Why was the Tree forbidden? Isn’t knowledge a good thing? Did Adam and Eve have Free Choice before they ate from the Tree? If everything the serpent said was true, where was the deception? How did eating from the Tree cause human mortality, the pain of childbirth, and the struggle to earn a living? What is the role of nakedness, clothing, and shame in the Tree of Knowledge story?

3. The faculty of daat (“knowledge”) is that part of our psyche that causes us to become personally invested in what we know and experience. While our daat is a reflection of G-d’s daat, there is an important distinction between the two. G-d is fully invested in His Creation,
yet remains unchanged by it. In contrast, everything that we know and experience becomes part of who and what we are.

4 Before partaking of the Tree, Adam and Eve had a perfect objective understanding of right and wrong, which fully equipped them to fulfill their mission of cultivating G-dliness in the world and rejecting evil. As a result of their transgression, their divine intellect was degraded to a subjective “daat of good and bad,” where personal prejudice and shortsighted cravings cloud a person’s judgment. This is why G-d forbade them to partake of the Tree of Knowledge: G-d desired to spare them the struggle and anguish that the entanglement of daat would bring.

5 The human being is a microcosm of the whole of Creation. By absorbing the “daat of good and bad” into themselves, Adam and Eve caused all of Creation to become a mishmash of good and bad, to the extent that “there is no good without some bad in it, and no bad without some good in it.”

6 The story of the Tree of Knowledge teaches us to appreciate the positive elements that exist in the “other” with whom we disagree and in the paradigms that we
reject. It encourages us to embrace the “messiness” of life as an opportunity for deeper and more meaningful engagement. It also teaches us to acknowledge our blunders, while discovering how a past negative can be transformed into a future positive.
Rabbi Shimon [bar Yocha’i] said:

Woe to the person who says that the Torah presents mere stories and ordinary words. If this were the case, we could compose a Torah right now with ordinary words, and better than any of them. . . . Rather, all the words of the Torah are sublime words and sublime secrets. . . .
Come and see: There is a garment that is visible to all. When the fools of the world see someone in a handsome garment, they look no further. Yet the significance of the garment is the body; and the significance of the body is the soul. So it is with the Torah. It has a body: the commandments of the Torah. . . . This body is clothed in garments—stories of this world. Fools look only at that garment, the story of the Torah; they know nothing more. . . . Those who know better look at the body within the garment. The truly wise—servants of the Supernal King, those who stood at Mount Sinai—look at the soul, the root of all, the real Torah. In the World to Come, they are destined to gaze at the soul of the soul of the Torah. . . .

As wine must be contained in a jug, so the Torah must be contained in these garments. But look to what is within the garments. All those words, all those stories, are garments.
Know and believe that the Garden of Eden is a place here on earth, in which there is the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge, and from which flows the river that separates into four streams. . . . But just as these exist on earth, so are there realities in the heavens that are also called by these names, and that serve as their foundation and source. . . .

Man sinned with the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge below and above, in deed as well as in concept. . . . All the events recounted here are two-dimensional: the revealed meaning and the hidden meaning are both true.
“And the serpent [was most cunning]” (Genesis 3:1).

Rabbi Isaac said, “It was the evil inclination.”

Rabbi Judah said, “It was an actual snake.”

They came before Rabbi Shimon [bar Yocha’i], who said to them, “It was both as one; it was Samael [Satan] who appeared as a snake.”
All parts of the Torah comprise one integral structure, in the same way that all of a person’s components—the organs and limbs of their body as well as the organs and limbs of their soul—together constitute the whole person.

In the same way, the inner part—or “soul”—of the Torah is one with the revealed part of the Torah. Indeed, we find in several places that the revealed part of Torah can only be explained by the soul of the Torah. The reverse is also the case . . . as we find in the [kabbalistic] writings of the Ari explanations of the plain meaning of the text.
The Torah is our “wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations” (Deuteronomy 4:6). Nevertheless, the word torah doesn’t mean “wisdom”; rather, it means “instruction.” This tells us that every single thing that the Torah relates serves as an instruction in a person’s daily life, for all times and in every place.

It needs to be understood: Why does G‑d say, “And now, perhaps he will send forth his hand, and he will also take from the tree of life, and he will eat and live forever”? Why is G‑d concerned over this, when the reason why He commanded Adam not to eat [from the Tree of Knowledge] in the first place was so that he should not die?
After man had already tasted of the Tree of Knowledge and became mixed up with the bad, G-d said, “Perhaps he will send forth his hand and also take from the tree of life, and eat and live forever.” G-d feared that man would . . . partake also of the Tree of Life, which is rooted higher than the “shattering of the vessels” from which death originates and which generated the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad. . . . For regarding this level, it is said, “If your sins are multiplied, what do you do to Him?” and “If you are righteous, what do you give Him?” (Job 35:6–7). So [if man will partake of the Tree of Life] . . . he could still live forever even though he has bad mixed in within him, and then the bad within him will also exist forever . . .
This is against that which G-d intended, for G-d desires that ultimately the bad should be exterminated . . . as will come to pass in the times of Mashiach. [Until then,] throughout the period of exile is the time of the “work of refinement” of separating the bad [from the good] . . . . That is why immediately after [man ate from the Tree], “G-d Almighty sent him out from the Garden of Eden, to work the soil wherefrom he was taken” (Genesis 3:23)—i.e., the work of refinement.