

Reclaiming the Self: Adam's Sin and the Human Psyche

By: MENACHEM KRAKOWSKI

“The intellect that was granted to man as the highest endowment, was bestowed on him before his disobedience... Through the intellect man distinguishes between the true and the false. This faculty Adam possessed perfectly and completely... When Adam was yet in a state of innocence, and was guided solely by reflection and reason—on account of which it is said: “You have made him (man) little lower than the angels” (Psalms 8: 6)—he was not at all able to follow or to understand the principles of apparent truths; the most manifest impropriety, viz., to appear in a state of nudity, was nothing unbecoming according to his idea: he could not comprehend why it should be so. After man’s disobedience, however, when he began to give way to desires which had their source in his imagination and to the gratification of his bodily appetites, as it is said, “The woman saw that the tree was good for food and delightful to the eyes” (Genesis 3:6), he was punished by the loss of part of that intellectual faculty which he had previously possessed...” (*Moreh Nevukhim*, 1:2)

Overview: “Who am I?”—Loss and Recapture of the Self

In *parashat Bereshit*, the Torah provides key insights into man’s psychic structure—the one that existed prior to Adam’s sin and the one that emerged afterwards, the ideal configuration and the actual one. The text together with its Talmudic exegesis delves into the phenomenology of temptation and of human choice. It allows us to

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understand how the person experiences his own self and how he can achieve an integrated sense of self.

The sin itself is multidimensional. The temptation to sin involves the various constituents of man's psyche, and the consequences of the sin, as expressed in G-d's curse, redefine all these constituents. Yet the "I" does not exist by itself alone. There is something that exists "beyond it," and can be termed "Other"—in that it is "Other than I." The self is always confronted by some other, and responds to that other; its position in relation to the other determines its own makeup. Man's first encounter is with G-d—He is the first "Other," and initially, G-d is clearly apparent to man. His presence is fully experienced. The self or psyche cannot be understood independently of its relationship to G-d. The enticement to sin questions the nature of this relationship and casts doubt on G-d's intentions toward man. Committing the sin alters the relationship and there is now a distancing from G-d. By partaking of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, man has created a new psychological and spiritual reality that becomes, from then on, human destiny. His existence in history will take place outside of the radiance of Gan Eden.

A deeper understanding of the verses in *parshat Bereshit* and the Sages' allegorical commentaries of these texts point to these psychological insights, but it is the Rambam, in the *Moreh Nevukhim* in the text quoted above and in other sections,¹ who provides an explicit and systematic formulation of these ideas. His description of man's psyche is compatible with various modern psychological formulations that emphasize the incongruity among its components. The psyche is made up of parts that are at odds with each other. Yet, man must assume responsibility for who he is—for the totality of his being—however discordant the elements. He must discover the genuine "I" that exists beyond its biological and psychological determinants.

The original state of man at creation would have led him to the "Tree of Life" and allowed him to escape the underlying conflicts and restrictions of matter. Yet the sin and its aftermath are not reported in the Bible in order to dishearten us at the irretrievable loss.

¹ *Moreh Nevukhim* 1:2, 3:8 and 2:30.

Man's brief stay in Gan Eden² is retained in our consciousness because it points to the possibility of transcendence. *Matan Torah* is the corrective experience that allows man to recapture features of the initial ideal state. Man can overcome the dominion of his instinctual nature and transcend his biological self, as he moves away from the self toward a greater whole.

The Setting of the Narrative: Man's Inner World and Subjective Reality

In the second chapter of *Bereshit*, the Torah provides a different account of creation from the one that appeared in the first chapter.

Then *HaShem* G-d formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. *HaShem* G-d planted a garden eastward, in Eden; and there He put the man whom He had formed. (*Bereshit* 2:7, 8)

A new perspective is being presented here. At first, man was but one creature in the immense universe. Here, in this second narrative, he occupies center stage and the world exists in relation to man. It is man who provides meaning to the rest of creation. Hence, the earth is presented now as desolate, as there is yet "not a man to till the ground."

No shrub of the field was yet in the earth, and no herb of the field had yet sprung up; for *HaShem* G-d had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was not a man to till the ground (*Bereshit* 2:5)

With man now at the center, it is not only the surrounding world that has changed, but also how G-d is experienced. The Name of G-d is no longer "*Elokim*," as in the first description of creation, but "*HaShem Elokim*," indicating that man relates to G-d and interacts with Him at the personal level.

² Sanhedrin 38b. Already in the twelfth hour of the first day, Adam was expelled from Gan Eden. "*Ve-Adam bi-yekar bal yalin.*" He did not spend the night in this glorious state. When man emerges from the initial day, he is already outside.

This shift between the first and second chapter occurs because it is man's internal and spiritual life that dominates this narrative of the "Second Creation." We are now seeing the world through the human lens. The trees and vegetation no longer refer to physical entities but serve as symbols of man's internal and spiritual life.

Out of the ground *HaShem* G-d made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. (*Bereshit* 2:9)

There is a mention, once again, of the animal world, but now man plays an active role in this creation, as he is the one who names these creatures. The whole creation is viewed from man's perspective.

Out of the ground *HaShem* G-d formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto the man to see what he would call them; and whatsoever the man would call every living creature, that was to be the name thereof. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field. (*Bereshit* 2:19)

The world is no longer simply an objective entity detached from man, where man is the last element to be created,³ but it exists in relation to man. This creation is not "physical" but "experiential." It is the world as seen by man. The Torah validates man's position at the center of creation through his own conception of that which is in creation. "Whatsoever the man would call every living creature, that was to be the name thereof." They exist now through their "names"—as conceptual entities—and the names represent man's contribution, his experience of the outside world.

Among the modifications between the first and second descriptions of creation is the formation of woman. In the first chapter we are told,

³ The Talmud states that if man becomes too haughty he may be reminded that even the gnats preceded him in the order of creation (*Sanhedrin* 38a).

G-d created man in His own image, in the image of G-d created He him; male and female created He them. (*Bereshit* 1:27)

Rambam explains this verse as telling us that man was created as male and female, like all other creatures. In the second chapter, where the internal and spiritual life is discussed, “man” and “woman” do not represent the two genders, but symbolical entities. Here the creation of “woman” entails a division, a break in the unity; yet the two are in such relation to each other, that there is no disharmony and the unity can be reestablished.

Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh. And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed. (*Bereshit* 2:24, 25)

Under these conditions of complete compatibility, “nakedness” produces no shame for it represents the natural state and innocence. Eventually, however, a division will occur. Man’s psyche and spiritual nature will undergo an important change through the sin. The initial harmony that was a given of the human condition is transformed, and a new structure emerges that is now subject to tension and conflict. The description of man’s temptation to sin, the sin itself, and its aftermath, as described in the curse, provides us with important information about man’s psyche and the switch that occurred.

The Constituents of Man’s Psyche: “Man,” “Woman” and “Serpent”

How are we to understand the cast of characters that appear here in the description of Adam’s sin? The Torah provides important cues by using identical expressions here and in the next *parasha*, in the warning that G-d gives Cain. Here, the woman is told (*Bereshit*, 3:16):

אל האשה אמר... ואל אישך, תשוקתך, והוא, ימשל בך.

And to the woman he said... to your husband shall be your desire and he shall rule over you.

In the next *parasha* the identical terms “*teshukah*” and “*moshel*” are used:

HaShem said to Cain: “Why are you vexed and why is your countenance fallen? If you do good, will there not be special privilege? And if you do not do good, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is to you, but you can rule over it.”

למה חרה לך, ולמה נפלו פניך. הלא אם תטיב, שאת, ואם לא תטיב,
לפתח חטאת רבץ; ואלריך, תשוקתו, ואתה, תמשל בו.

Thus, there is a parallel terminology used for the interaction between “man” and “woman” and the relation between the “sin” and Cain.

The interaction represented in Cain’s story is easier to interpret and provides us with an important analogy to understand our text. G-d warns Cain that sin is crouching at the door. The internal element, the impulse and urge that Cain experiences, is termed *חטאת* and personified as external in the “third person.” It can be contrasted to Cain’s true self that G-d addresses as “you.” This external threat is “at the door”; it can penetrate within the self and take control. The direction of the desire and the drive toward sin is not expressed as from self to sin, but from sin to self (*eleikha teshukato*). The genuine self that is the “You” is more basic than the instinctual impulse, which is an external threat to the integrity of the person. Hence the self can reassert its own ascendancy—“ואתה תמשל” “בו.” The capacity to control and dominate the impulses is an expression of the true self.

In each of these scenarios, there are two entities interacting with each other: in one scenario, it is the sin and Cain; in the other the woman and the man. One entity (the sin or the woman) is turned toward the other (Cain or the man) with yearning, *teshukah*. The other entity reacts or must react by exerting control (*moshel*) over the first entity. The *teshukah* is expressed as a noun and not as a verb;⁴ furthermore, this yearning is directed at the person; it is moving in

⁴ This would have been expressed as “*hu hoshvek be-kha*.” The noun emphasizes that it is a different entity and not an expression of the person, as is suggested by the verb.

the direction of the self, but has not reached him. This is indicated by the preposition “el.”⁵ The response of the other entity is to control and “rule over” this entity that yearns for him.⁶

In the story of Cain, we are clearly dealing with intrapsychic components. There is no actual external sin crouching in wait for Cain; it is his own inner impulses that are presented in this fashion. The symbolism in the two stories is not identical; “man” is not “self” and “woman” not “Sin,” but the Cain story reveals that we are dealing with intrapsychic structures in conflict. The “self” (as the true “you”) is closer to the “Man” and the “Sin” is closer to the “Woman.”⁷ These elements share some common dynamic interaction revealed by the identical terms *moshel* and *tesbukab*.

Rabbinical literature provides us with another essential element in understanding the symbolism of the characters. The Midrash⁸ identifies the *nabash* as the *Yetzer ha-ra*. Clearly if one of the main characters in the story is defined as an intrapsychic component, it is hard to view the others in any other way. It is difficult to interpret “man” and “woman” literally.⁹ Furthermore, as the Rambam points out, why would the serpent relate only to the woman and not to the man?

The Rambam emphasizes key aspects about the structure and the dynamics of these constituents of the psyche, in the text quoted above. Furthermore, he states:

⁵ The term “*tesbukab*” appears only once more in Tanakh, in *Shir ha-Shirim* “*ve-alai tesbukato*.” The preposition in that verse is “*al*” and not “*el*.” The yearning has been fulfilled and “resides upon” her.

⁶ The preposition “*be*” indicates greater entry and penetration and can be contrasted to “*el*” indicative of direction. The verb is used and it is stated in an affirmative manner; “you will control the impulse”; the “man” will control the “woman.”

⁷ In fact, a close reading of *Moreh Nevukhim* (3:8) implies that man and woman in Eden are to be viewed as psychic components. See his quote of יהוה ימשל בך. See note 12.

⁸ *Pirkei de R. Eliezer*, chapter 13.

⁹ “The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all life.” It is only after the sin that we deal with a specific woman. Until now we were dealing with “woman” as a symbol.

“... It is especially of importance to notice that the serpent did not approach or address Adam, but all his attempts were directed against Eve, and it was through her that the serpent caused injury and death to Adam. The greatest hatred exists between the serpent and Eve, and between his seed and her seed; her seed being undoubtedly also the seed of man. More remarkable still is the way in which the serpent is joined to Eve, or rather his seed to her seed; the head of the one touches the heel of the other. Eve defeats the serpent by crushing its head, whilst the serpent defeats her by wounding her heel.” (*Moreh* 2:30)

Each entity communicates only with the one closest to it, such that the more primitive instinctual drives operate through the intermediary of the emotional and symbolic realm in order to impact on the higher levels.

There are various psychological models that are consistent with this presentation. As an illustration we have chosen here the “triune model of the brain” that was advanced by Paul MacLean.¹⁰ He conceives of the overall brain as consisting of three different parts. They “constitute a hierarchy of three brains in one, or what may be called for short a triune brain” (p. 309).¹¹ “Man,” “woman” and “serpent” can be seen as representing these three different parts.

Man represents the highest level. This consists of the neocortex, which can be seen as the seat of thought and rationality, judgment and abstraction. This is the part of ourselves that we are most aware of; the way we see “who we are.” The “woman” represents the paleomammalian brain. It is composed of the limbic system and is the seat of our emotions. It provides us with emotional experiences and evaluates the emotional quality of things. The “serpent” would represent the most primitive part of the brain, and anatomically the innermost portion. This is appropriately termed the “reptilian brain,” as this primitive component is already present in reptiles. It is associated with basic biological function, including

¹⁰ MacLean, P. D. (1973). *A Triune Concept of Brain and Behavior*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

¹¹ MacLean, P. D. (1978). *A Mind of Three Minds: Educating the Triune Brain*. In J.S. Chall & A. F. Mirsky (Eds). *Education and the Brain: The Seventy-Seventh Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part II* (pp. 308–342). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

sexuality. It reacts and responds in terms of bodily needs and sensations. MacLean considers that the integration among these three “brains” is inadequate, each “brain” being inherently different and incompatible with the others, and there is no full integration or awareness among the parts. There are primitive drives, emotional experiences, and repressed desires that are not directly accessible to our conscious awareness. They exert an important influence over our emotional and cognitive life.

In the harmonious state prior to the sin, we had only the “man” and the “woman.” The elements were well integrated. The snake, the third element, is entirely subsumed within the woman. It emerges through the sin; at first it seems well integrated and appears to partake of man’s and woman’s innocence. Thus, a similar terminology is used to denote man and woman *וְיָהִי שְׁנֵיהֶם עֲרוּמִים* in their original state of innocence and to characterize the snake *וְהַנָּחָשׁ* *הָיָה עֲרוּם מְכַל חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה*. It is through the sin (or more accurately the temptation to sin) that the snake becomes a separate entity.¹²

The woman represents the central core that translates primitive biological urges in such a way that they can reach conscious awareness. She is the point of contact between the other two parts of the psyche. The snake speaks only to the woman. It is through her

¹² The emphasis in this article is on the tripartite division, which is consistent with modern ideas about man’s psyche. It is possible to provide a parallel interpretation using the Aristotelian concepts of Form and Matter (“*Tzurab*” and “*Homer*”). In this formulation, “Man” represents Form, while “Woman” corresponds to Matter. It is only through Matter that sin is possible; hence the snake affects man only through the woman. In the *Moreh* (3:8), Rambam states: “Man’s shortcomings and sins are all due to the substance of the body and not to its form; while all his merits are exclusively due to his form. Thus the knowledge of G-d, the formation of ideas, the mastery of desire and passion, the distinction between that which is to be chosen and that which is to be rejected, all these man owes to his form; but eating, drinking, sexual intercourse, excessive lust, passion, and all vices, have their origin in the substance of his body. ... The Creator gave to the form of man power, rule, and dominion (“*mosbel*”) over the substance; the form can subdue the substance, refuse the fulfillment of its desires, and reduce them, as far as possible, to a just and proper measure. The station of man varies according to the exercise of this power.”

that he gains access to man. It is the woman then who gives the fruit to the man who eats. In the curse the woman is at the center and the relationships are defined as “woman-snake” and “woman-man.”

Once the snake has entered into the picture there is disharmony among the components. There is conflict between “woman” and “snake” that bites from “below” and must be crushed on its “head.” There is also tension between woman and man expressed as *teshukah*, a yearning directed at “man,” which must be controlled. The woman represents the experience of emotional and affective involvement, of caring deeply about something. This is the *teshukah*; it is essential if man’s activities are to be done with passion. If the lower instincts are in control of this strategic center, then man is driven by his instinctual urges. Aspirations and ideals must control (*yimshol*) passion, but without passion, all values and ideals remain shallow and lifeless.

Inappropriate sexuality, rage and other urges are not simply expressions of innate drives, but manifestations of a fragmented self. Rational appeals to exert greater self-control can be only partially successful—as they do not necessarily engage the person’s emotional core. It is the gradual strengthening of the structure of the self that allows for harmonious control of impulses and emotions. It is along these lines that we can understand the Gemara’s statement that, when dealing with the evil inclination, “the left hand should distance, but the right hand should draw near.”¹³ A careful balancing act is required.

The Tree of Knowledge and the Phenomenology of the Sin

In the opening text, Rambam mentions that after man’s disobedience “he began to give way to desires which had their source in his imagination and to the gratification of his bodily appetites, as it is said, ‘The wife saw that the tree was good for food and delightful to the eyes’ (Genesis 3:6).” The sin entails gratification of basic impulses and fantasies elaborated by the imagination. Because of the power of these urges and needs, man’s knowledge represented by the *‘etx ha-da’at* is always subject to distortion. The “knowing” is often derived

¹³ *Sanhedrin* 107b.

from the “wanting.” Man determines what is good and bad on the basis of his needs and urges.

The primacy of the instinctual impulses and the biological self gets translated in other ways as well. There are other dimensions to the sin beyond the instinctual. From the very first, the fact that the “snake” has entered into the picture results in a diminution of the relationship with G-d. The snake is not capable of understanding G-d as “*HaShem Elokim*.” He speaks of G-d as “*Elokim*.” The Name that conveys the intense personal relationship has been lost. This distancing from G-d is not simply the result of the sin, but an inherent part of it. It is this distancing that makes the transgression possible.

The serpent challenges G-d’s intentions toward man. G-d’s commandment was given not for man’s benefit, but to his detriment. It is a restriction.¹⁴ This statement would in itself be quite revolutionary, but the snake goes one step further. Following your desires will not only set you free, but also place you at the very center of the universe. You will create a new universe through this pursuit, one in which you are *elohim*. G-d’s commandment is not only an attempt to deprive, but to diminish him. Man is not only robbed of pleasure, but he is prevented from reaching unlimited greatness. Unfettered man is great. At the core of this line of reasoning there is a shift in how G-d is viewed and the relative importance of G-d and man. Man can be “godlike.” The snake, in redefining the relationship between man and G-d, attempts to redefine G-d. Hence the Gemara mentions that “Adam denied G-d.”¹⁵

This is the “phenomenological world” of the person who is tempted. This is where he stands, as he is about to commit the sin. A self-contained and self-sufficient world is projected. At some level, the person might know that this is not true, but reason is bypassed. Reason speaks in a different language that lacks the immediacy and

¹⁴ Man feels restricted by the limitations and considers that he would be a more complete person were he not so restrained. He defines freedom as freedom from commitments. In fact the command allows him entry into a different dimension of existence, with different type of human relationships, where envy, lust and such are not the primary determinants.

¹⁵ This is Rav Naḥman’s opinion (*Sanhedrin* 38b).

urgency of the unfulfilled desire. This desire is all-powerful, and any appeal to reason appears lackluster and lifeless. Rules and regulations are seen as arbitrary impositions that fail to satisfy man's basic needs.

The participation of "man" in the sin appears to be minimal. There is no exchange between the man and the woman. We are simply told, "וַתֵּן גַּם לְאִשָּׁה עֵצָה וַיֹּאכַל" (Genesis 3:6). The preposition "עֵצָה" indicates the subordination of "Man" to the "Woman." Once the snake has won over this central core of caring and passion, the intellect, reason and the need for transcendence are all secondary to the desire.

The snake's position is characteristic of an "egocentric" approach to life. Sensuality and self-concern are primary, and there is a devaluation of the "Other." From this perspective, to the extent that G-d (who is Other, being other than "I") is powerful, "I" am diminished. G-d's dictate is experienced as arbitrary, being external to man's need or passion. By submitting to the will of the "Other," man is diminished. To give free expression to his needs, he must counteract the interdict, and define on his own "good" and "evil." The "good" and "bad" do not represent an a priori standard;¹⁶ they are not independent of man's action. It is by partaking of the forbidden fruit that the tree becomes the "Tree of Knowledge." It is through the sin itself that man invents a new way of "knowing." Evil is no longer simply a theoretical possibility; it has been lived and experienced.

"Where are You?" "איכה"

When G-d confronts Adam after the sin, He asks, "Where are you?" (*Beresbit* 3:9). At creation, G-d is not concealed, but clearly apparent to man—a full relationship with G-d is a given. The first hiding

¹⁶ The snake's position is comparable to Sartre's existential philosophy (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. Philip Mairet, London: Methuen, 1970) pp. 27-28. He maintains that there is no a priori truth or law that provides meaning to man's life. In the absence of G-d's law, man is left on his own to define good and evil. He must make his own values in "complete freedom," which means freedom from all authority or dictates. The meaning of man's life is not established before his existence; he creates this meaning himself.

occurs after the sin, and is presented as man hiding from G-d, rather than G-d hiding from man (הסתר פנים). The question therefore is not “Where is G-d?” but “Where is man?” Spiritually, where he is determines who he is. After the sin, there has been a distancing from G-d.

Adam answers, “את-קלך שמעתי בגן; ואירא כי עירם אנכי, ואחבא.” “I heard Your voice in the Garden, and I was afraid for I am naked, and I hid.” (*Beresbit* 3:10). This decrease in spirituality is further evidenced by the fact that G-d’s voice frightens him. There has been a disruption in the dialogue, and it is no longer a familiar voice. Man has become aware of his potential for extreme physicality and of the split that now exists between the material and spiritual realms. He is aware of his nakedness and is ashamed of it. As he has become less spiritual, that which was natural becomes a source of shame.

The Descent into the Life of the Impulses

Rambam writes that our passage from *Beresbit*

“contains wonderful wisdom, and fully agrees with real facts, as will be found by those who understand all the chapters of this treatise. When the serpent came to Eve he infected her with poison; the Israelites, who stood at Mount Sinai, removed that poison; idolaters, who did not stand at Mount Sinai, have not got rid of it.” (*Moreh* 2:30)

The relationship between woman and snake can become all-powerful. This is represented allegorically in the midrash by the snake’s desire for the woman and the description of the snake “engaging in intercourse” with the woman.¹⁷ He thereby instills a poison in her. This is the representation of a life and a society that are driven by primitive desires and urges. They attain independence of the control exerted by “man.” The gratification of the impulses serves as ultimate reinforcement, and the eventual consequences of such behavior, which are often detrimental, are totally ignored. The primitive impulses acquire greater momentum and importance, as

¹⁷ The *Gemara* in *Shabbat* (145b-146a) mentions that intercourse with the Serpent affected future generations.

they are associated with other emotional needs and become important fantasies. Thus, sexual urges are transformed into powerful romantic fantasies of an “ideal relationship,” which will allow gratification not only of the sexual needs, but of the emotional needs as well. The *teshukah* is raw and primal; it is not processed through reflection and judgment. The person resents the intrusion of cold reason into the picture. A reasonable solution to the problem is willfully discarded.

The *teshukah* comes with its own logic and “wholeness.” It provides its own justification. The powerful emotions and symbols occupy the very center of the person. The higher spiritual and rational faculties that could exert their force (*moshel*) and integrate the other psychic elements with each other and with external reality, are bypassed. The snake has taken over. He is victorious.

“Where is Your Brother?”

Cain’s sin symbolizes man’s further degeneration through his submission to his passions and his complete rejection of the “other.” The impulses are not sexual but aggressive. Cain’s rage is a response to narcissistic injury—his sacrifice having been rejected in favor of his brother’s. G-d’s question “Where is Abel, your brother?” here as with Adam is phrased in terms of “where.” It can be interpreted as “where is the ‘other,’ your brother in your system?” In Cain’s reply there is a rejection of any responsibility to the other. “ויאמר לא ידעתי, השמר אחי אנכי” “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper!” Man’s absolute freedom to act as he pleases results in the denial of the other and in its ultimate form leads to the annihilation of the other. The terminology used in describing Cain’s sin expands on the terminology used in Adam’s sin. With Adam, we are told, “ויגרש את האדם”. The removal that takes place is from Gan Eden. With Cain, we are told, “ויצא קין מלפניי” —his expulsion is from G-d’s presence. With Adam it is the earth that is cursed in its relation to man; with Cain, it is Cain himself, i.e., man, who is cursed in his relation to the earth (“ועתה”) “ארור אתה מן האדמה”—*Beresbit* 4:11). Thus, carrying the sin to its extreme form results in the destruction of man’s relationship to G-d and the destruction of man himself, as he is now cursed.

The Tree of Life and Transcendence

Rambam writes (in our opening text):

The intellect that was granted to man as the highest endowment, was bestowed on him before his disobedience. With reference to this gift the Bible states that “man was created in the form and likeness of G-d.”

In the Talmud, man's initial status is represented as unlimited. “His body reached from earth to heaven [or from one end of the world to the other] before the sin caused him to shrink” (*Hagigah* 12a, *Sanhedrin* 38b).

It is by going “beyond the self,” by responding to the call of the “other,” that one achieves transcendence, which is represented by the “Tree of Life.” Man expands his own limits for the sake of the “other,” for the larger entity of which he is now a part. It is in this fashion that he partakes of the tree of life and survives. Within the restricted self, there can be only death.

The Torah represents the transcendence of the self.¹⁸ The ultimate expression of this transcendence is represented by the Jews' acceptance of the Torah at Sinai. At Sinai, the Jews recaptured the pristine state of understanding, where the self is no longer at the center. This is expressed in the reversal of the sequence of *na'asseh* and *nishma*. They placed the *na'asseh* prior to the *nishma*. Normally, man is aware of his needs, and it is this awareness that determines his actions. The *nishma* precedes the *na'asseh*; he must evaluate his actions in terms of his self-interests prior to his commitment to action.

The *Na'asseh ve-nishma*—this sudden intuition at Sinai—recreates the state of innocence prior to the sin. It is knowledge that exists “outside the tree of knowledge.” It presupposes another organization of the human psyche.

Rambam mentions that it is with regard to man's clear apprehension that preceded the sin, that the verse mentions, “You have made him (man) little lower than the angels” (Psalms, 8: 6). This is consistent with the *Gemara* in Shabbat, which states that the Jews'

¹⁸ See *Hilkebot Teshuvah* 5:1 and *Shemonah Perakim* chapter 8 where Rambam equates the *Etz Hahayim* to the Torah.

acceptance of the Torah expressed through “*na’asseh ve-nishma*” corresponds to the apprehension of the angels.

R. Elazar said: At the time the Israelites said “We will do” and afterward “We will hearken” a heavenly voice was heard, which said to them: “Who has revealed to my children this secret which is employed by the angels?” For it is written [Psalms 103:20]: “Bless the L-rd, you His angels, mighty in strength, that execute His word, that listen to the voice of His word.” First they “execute” and then they “listen.” (Shabbat 88a)

This type of understanding transcends usual human comprehension. In fact, the *Gemara* presents a denigration of this acceptance by a heretic, where he presents the Jews’ failure to consider their own self-interest as impetuous. He considers that they consented prematurely without any proper assessment.

“You, impetuous people, who gave precedence to your mouth over your ears!... First you should have heard the Torah. If it is within your powers, accept it; if not you should not have accepted it!” (Shabbat 88a)

It was more difficult for man to sin before he actually sinned, because he was in the midst of a relationship with G-d. Thus, we can indeed say that man increased his freedom through the sin. Because of the compelling nature of the relationship with G-d, there was less choice. This is also the case with regard to man’s choice in accepting the Torah. The above *Gemara* provides an important allegorical depiction of the “coercive” nature of Revelation.

It is written [Exodus, 19:17]: “They stood under the mount.” R. Abdimi b. Hama b. Hassa said: “This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, overturned the mountain upon them like an inverted cask, and said to them, ‘If you accept the Torah, it is well; if not, there shall be your burial.’” Said R. Aha b. Yaakov: “This would accord us the right to protest against any punishment inflicted upon us for violating the law [since it was forcibly imposed upon us].” (*Shabbat* 88a)

They are not free to choose because of the compelling nature of the Revelation. The ability to choose was limited at *Matan Torah* because of the intense relationship with G-d within Revelation and of

the clarity of the vision. There is a level at which conflict, doubt, and temptation are bypassed. This is the level of man before the sin and that of the Jews at Sinai.¹⁹

The bypassing of temptation is also referred to in the verse when G-d tells Cain, “הלווא אם תיטיב שאת” —when the person moves to the good, the sin does not enter into the picture. It is only “*im lo teitin*” that “*la-petah hatat rovetz*”; it is only then that sin enters into the picture, but even then he can overcome and control the impulse to sin.

Creating the Self

The self can experience two different types of freedoms and two different types of coercions with diametrically opposite meanings. Man has the illusion of freedom when he is free to do as he pleases, giving in to all his urges with no constraint and no sense of responsibility. This is in fact the coercion of the *yetzer ha-ra*; man's impulses and urges prevent him from achieving his true self. The other freedom is freedom from his passions and urges. There is a full assumption of his role vis-à-vis the other, due to the clarity of the vision that does not allow for doubt or temptation of the self. This strong sense of answerability can be termed “coercion.”

The idea that the *yetzer ha-ra* coerces man and limits his free will is consistent with the presentation of Cain's impulses as external to the true self, and Cain himself as their intended victim.²⁰ This idea of the externality of the impulse that seizes man is important in understanding the principle of coercion to perform a mitzvah or obligation, “*makkim oto 'ad she-omer rotzeb ani*” to counteract the compulsive nature of the urge. Rambam²¹ explains:

¹⁹ It is in this sense that we should understand the interpretation of “*h'arut*” as “*h'erut—h'erut me-Yetzer ha-ra*.”

²⁰ The lack of free will is most obvious in some mental states such as psychosis, intoxication and dissociative states. These various conditions are not simply aberrations; they provide insights into man's makeup. See also *Sotah* 3a שטות בו רוח שטות א"כ נכנס בו רוח שטות, “A person does not commit a transgression unless a spirit of insanity enters into him.”

²¹ See Rambam, *Hilkebot Gerushin* 2:17 (*halakhab* 20 in the standard edition).

אין אומרין אנוס, אלא למי שנלחץ ונדחק לעשות דבר שאינו חייב מן התורה לעשותו, כגון מי שהוכה עד שמכר, או נתן; אבל מי שתקפו יצרו הרע לבטל מצוה, או לעשות עבירה, והוכה עד שעשה דבר שחייב לעשותו, או עד שנתרחק מדבר שאסור לעשותו—אין זה אנוס ממנו, אלא הוא אנס עצמו בדעתו הרעה.

“There is coercion only when someone was compelled or pressured to do something that the Torah does not obligate him to do, such as someone who was beaten up until he sold or gave away his property. If his evil inclination forced him to annul a commandment or to transgress and he was hit until he did that which he was supposed to do, or until he refrained from doing that which he was forbidden to do, this is not considered coercion; on the contrary he coerced himself through his evil way of thinking.”

Man is not meant to be a passive organism simply reacting to the yearning, but he is intended to impose meaning on the yearning. The self is not driven by *teshukah*, but on the contrary, it is through the control exerted over the desires that the full self²² is created. It is because man can control (*timsbol*) that he is *atab*. Yet, man's free will is not a given. What exists is a potential for free will that can be actualized and developed over time.

This second type of coercion is due to the clarity of the vision that does not allow for doubt or temptation. This is the knowledge of *emet* and *sheker* and not that of *tov va-ra*. The experience is so compelling as to preclude choice in the usual sense of the term, which is typified by the *etx ha-da'at*. The choice is so obvious that there is no choice! This is the element of coercion that the *Gemara* discusses as “*kafa aleihem ha-bar ke-gigil*”—“G-d suspended the mountain over them like a cask” (*Shabbat* 88a).

It is only later in history, after the first Temple has been destroyed at the time of Esther, with further decline into “*hester panim*,” that man can choose freely on his own, because the vision is no longer compelling. He can choose freely whether to see or not to

²² Rambam (*Moreh* 3:8): The knowledge of G-d, the formation of ideas, the mastery of desire and passion, the distinction between that which is to be chosen and that which is to be rejected, all these man owes to his form.

see G-d's hand in the events—it is no longer undeniable, but subject to human interpretation.

Rava said: Although (at that time they were compelled to accept it), at the time of Ahasuerus they accepted it voluntarily, for it is written [Esther, 9:27]: “*kijmu ve-kiblu ha-Yebudim.*” “The Jews confirmed, and took upon themselves and upon their seed.” And it is to be explained: “They confirmed what they had accepted long before.” G-d's presence was no longer overwhelmingly clear. It is a period of *hester panim*, of G-d's hidden presence. Man must make an effort to recognize within what seems to be natural events as G-d's presence and G-d's hand. The acceptance of Purim represents this ability to discern the deeper pattern that exists under the surface, to detect the world of Revelation within the confines of the existing world.

The word *הָמָן הָעֵץ*, אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתֶיךָ לְבַלְתִּי אֲכָל מִמֶּנּוּ *הָמָן הָעֵץ* is seen as a reference to Haman²³—for that period represents *hester panim* with an ascendancy of evil, and such a state of affairs was made possible through the partaking of the fruit of the tree. In this ascendancy of evil, rampant narcissism is not only possible at the individual level, but appears to control the world, as it serves as the basis for critical life-and-death decisions. Haman represents this facet of the *hester panim*.²⁴

The poison that was instilled in the woman was removed at Sinai. The Jews who received the revelation were freed of this deleterious effect, and the underlying personality that exists as a result of living a life imbued with Torah values and within a community guided by these values emerged. The corrective step is Revelation, which reintroduces the contact with G-d that existed at the

²³ *Hullin* 139b. The *Gemara* finds an allusion to Haman in the verse “Did you eat of [*ha-min*, identical in spelling to Haman's name] the tree?” (Genesis 3:11).

²⁴ “Haman recounted to them the glory of his riches, and the multitude of his children... ‘yet all this is of no value, so long as I see Mordechai the Jew sitting at the king's gate.’” (Esther 5:11-13) “*ve-kh'ol zeh eino shaveh li...*” This statement indicates an extreme form of narcissism. Unlimited honors and wealth cannot satisfy him, as long as there is the slightest denial of complete gratification.

beginning.²⁵ It is in this genuine contact with “G-d” that man escapes the pull of instinctual centeredness²⁶ and the fragmentation of the self. ❧

²⁵ *Matan Torah* recreates the initial status that existed for Adam. The Divine Presence (*Shekhinah*) removed itself, step by step, from the midst of men during the initial period in the history of mankind. The first withdrawal took place as a result of Adam’s sin. Eventually there was a full restoration of that status at *Matan Torah* (*Midrash Rabbah, Song of Songs*, 5:1; “*bati le-gani*”).

²⁶ When we feel G-d’s presence intensely, instinctual urges are diminished. Thus, the *Gemara* mentions that the *yetzer ha-ra’* has no power on Yom Kippur. The numerical value of *ha-satan* [Satan] is three hundred sixty four. The Satan’s seductive powers are limited to 364 days. On the 365th day, Yom Kippur, he has no power over man (*Nedarim* 32a). The intensity of the experience on Yom Kippur precludes the *yetzer ha-ra’* from influencing us. Similarly with *Matan Torah* they were free of the *yetzer ha-ra’*.