

Echoes of Eden

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Parshat Re'eh: Choices

God gives man choices; these are described as blessings and curses, or life and death. Remarkably, mankind has always needed to be encouraged to choose life. This seemingly automatic, rational choice has never been the “no-brainer” it should be. Why would any sane person choose a cursed path that leads to certain death over the blessed path of life? Apparently, the choice is somewhat more complicated, and our judgment curiously clouded. From time immemorial, the Tree of Death and its luscious fruit looked like the gleaming and attractive choice - more delicious, more desirable. In addition, a seductive, serpentine salesman hissed in our ears about how the fruit of this tree could solve all our problems, enlighten and empower us.

Those of you who rushed to consult your Bibles because you do not recall reading about a “tree of death” are partially correct: there was, indeed, a tree of death, presented by God Himself as the antithesis of the Tree of Life. Clearly, in order to allow man to make a choice between these two options, this tree needed a more palatable image, and so it was marketed and promoted as a “Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil”. While many of us often think of this tree and its fruit as a viable option to the other choice, and conveniently refer to it in shorthand as a tree of knowledge, it was, in fact, the tree that represented a confusion of good and evil, a tree whose fruit distanced us from the source of life itself – clarity and understanding, proximity to God and holiness. This tree and its fruit are the physical representation of the choices that lead to death – of experience

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without understanding, of knowledge without wisdom, of information devoid of values.

This choice, this path in life, has not changed much since the days of Adam and Eve: Even today, in the information age, the toxic cloud of confusion created by the amalgamation of good and evil casts a massive shadow that obscures our sightline to true knowledge and real life. Contemporary examples abound: In our generation, computer technology and the internet give us access to information in staggering quantity, but good and evil are often combined and confused. Is all the information we access reliable? Do we want our children to take in everything the internet has to offer? Can we ourselves, as intelligent and discerning adults, accurately evaluate or

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adequately assimilate all of the words and images we are fed? Is it any wonder that one of the most successful computer companies in the world (the creator and manufacturer of the machine on which I am writing these words) represents itself by a fruit with a bite missing – perhaps depicting the forbidden fruit?

What the Torah teaches us is not that the internet, or any technology, is evil or forbidden. The image of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil represents the confusion that is to be found in many different aspects of human life. We are warned that the source of truth – absolute truth – is accessible to us, but the fruits of the tree of death continue to entice and attract our attention and imagination. Why are we attracted to this fruit? Are we hard-wired to self-destruct? Were we created with a death wish? Is the urge to experience the fruit of the ‘tree of death’ an attempt to anesthetize ourselves, to punish ourselves, or do we simply desire what we cannot have? Do we fancy ourselves to be gods? Perhaps all of these motives combine; perhaps the

confusion of motives is one more result of having ingested, of continuing to ingest, the fruit of the tree that confuses and clouds truth and reality, and leads us astray from our life-source, to death.

As man becomes more and more sophisticated, as we obtain and attempt to synthesize more and more information, our need for clarity becomes more and more acute. All of our sophistication has not made us immune to confusion; in fact, we may say that the opposite is true. Now more than ever, we need a healthy dose of the fruit of the Tree of Life – of clear morals and values that can equip us to make sense of the glut of information that is the defining trait of modern life. Our choices often seem so much less cut-and-dried than they were in the Garden of Eden; our lives seem to be composed of so many shades of grey. Moshe's message is that complex moral dilemmas can be distilled into one question: Which choice will lead me closer to my spiritual source of life? The Tree of Life, Torah and its immutable moral guidelines, provides this clarity. From the dawn of creation, evil has been dressing up, making promises. To choose life, we must focus on the word of God and not the slick salesman selling snake oil; his promises are empty, and the potion never works.

The choice that confronts the People of Israel as they prepare to enter the Promised Land is the choice that confronts us, individually and collectively, to this very day. Once again, two paths diverge from the junction at which we are poised. Will we repeat the mistakes of the past? Will we, once again, choose death? Moshe reminds them, and us, of the choices, and of our capabilities. He calls upon them, as he calls upon us, to rise to the occasion, to raise our heads above the cloud of confusion and not to lose sight of the Tree of Life, the moral compass with which we have been armed. Above all, Moshe reminds us that we are capable of making the right choice – but it is a choice. God, for His part, is rooting for us: "Choose life."

For a more in-depth analysis see <http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2013/08/parashat-reeh.html>