

גדאשית


Did not use  
but marked passages  
careful!

5/8/99

מוצש"ק/12 December, 1998

Commencement/1999

1. My and my classmates 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of graduation from YC
2. Title: "THREE TREES"...
3. What is it, in perspective of ½ century, that we learned from our undergrad experience at Yeshiva University? What connects me--who was graduated in mid century--to you, who leave YC during last year this terrible and glorious century?
4. I wish to focus on one issue only—that of *knowledge*. It is knowledge, after all, that a university purports to transmit to its students. And it is knowledge—ידיעת התורה and דעת ה'—that the yeshiva classically strives to imbue its disciples. Our question, then, is at once both universal and intimate, personal. To understand this simultaneously abstract and relevant question, let us begin at the beginning: בראשית, the Torah's conception of the origins of humankind.
5. Torah: 2 trees: עצה"ד טו"ר ועצה"ח... Both forbidden to Adam and Eve... Let's take them one at a time.
6. Tree of Knowledge. "The knowledge of good and evil" = off-limits for man. Punishment for transgression=death. Serpent—metaphor for human concupiscence, human propensity for overreaching, or simply: human weakness—tells our first couple: לא מות תמותון, כי יודע אלקים כי ביום אכלכם ממנו ונפקחו עיניכם והייתם כאלהים... יודעי טוב ורע...
7. Maimonides question in *Guide*: Was "punishment" the gift of reason?...
8. My answer: In Eden, before the primal sin, mankind knew clearly the distinction between Good and Evil. Man admired the purely good, and abhorred the wholly evil. It was the serpent—the human יצר הרע—that threw a monkey wrench into this idyllic scene. He sought to convince our first grandparents that if they ate of the forbidden fruit, the knowledge they possessed would grant them unimaginable gifts, namely, *knowledge is power*. It is this distortion of the *telos*, the end and purpose of knowledge, that corrupted humankind. The blessing of knowledge was transformed into a curse: the use or misuse of knowledge for the purpose of control, domination, enrichment. All the good that might have come from the accumulation of knowledge has now been compromised by substituting knowledge for power for knowledge for its own sake. The divine gift of knowledge became the human liability of knowledge gone awry.

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9. What was the result of this awesome error? R. Isaac Luria: Good and Evil thereafter mixed—good in evil and, worse, evil in good. Function and duty of humans is now to separate the good from the evil, to purify and clarify the good and thus restore the wholeness of the pre-sin Paradise. Mostly—to use knowledge primarily for its own beneficent reasons and not for the selfish benefits of power and domination.
10. Consider what the misuse of knowledge has done to our civilization. For every medical breakthrough, there has been another form of poisoning of the environment. For every convenience has come social displacement. For every chemical invention that makes life better has come Zyklon-B gas, and for every engineering feat to explore the heavens has come a nuclear arsenal in another irresponsible country. Knowledge is no longer solely benevolent. Good and Evil are inexorably mixed. We have eaten of the forbidden fruit, and we are victims as well as possessors of knowledge.
11. The Zohar probably had this—or something like it—in mind when it asserted that Within the Tree of Knowledge there flourished another tree—the **אילנא דמוותא**, the Tree of Death! Knowledge for the sake of **והייתם כאלהים** is the fruit of the Tree of Death.
12. Think of that as you leave your texts and classrooms, your teachers and laboratories. You are part of the generation that has been obsessively concerned with careers and jobs. Some of you have come in to Yeshiva with the aim of getting out ASAP. The result is that you have perhaps gained in knowledge, but hardly in wisdom. Your knowledge may help you become rich or powerful, but the good and the not-so-good are mixed, and in the rush to success you may mistake one for the other.
13. The Tree of Life....
14. Conclude with plea for breadth, for learning **לשמה**, for a moral and even spiritual dimension....
15. Then switch to Hebrew and **דברי מוסר** following on the Three Trees theme.
16. Someplace in above, turn practical: to grow beyond the frantic search for success... to know in order to serve as well as to control, to educate as well as dominate...
17. Examples of role models when I was student: Rav, Dr Belkin, Dr. Braun, Eli Levine, Dr Isaacs, .....