

# The Two Non-Commands of the Torah

Bereishit 5779

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## I.

THE STORY OF ADAM and Chava's sin revolves around two atypical commandments: one that doesn't actually exist, and another that doesn't seem like much of a command at all – but from them two of Judaism's most important principles about how we serve God are learned.

## II.

If you open your Chumash to page 12, you'll see the following:

וַיִּצַו יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים עַל-הָאָדָם לֵאמֹר מִכָּל עֵץ-הַגָּן אָכַל תֹּאכַל: וּמֵעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וְרָע לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ כִּי בַיּוֹם אָכַלְתָּ מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת תָּמוּת:

And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat; but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die.” (Gen. 2:16–17)

We typically read the phrase וַיִּצַו as forbidding the fruit of the tree of knowledge, the *etz ha-da'at*. God's command is understood this way as “you can eat from all the trees but this one.” But Rabbi Dr. Aharon Lichtenstein – the chief architect of Modern Orthodoxy in the late 20th- and early 21st-century – reads it differently. There are two commands here, not one. The second is the one we think of, forbidding the fruit of the *etz ha-da'at* – and I'll talk about this one shortly – but there is an initial command: מִכָּל עֵץ-הַגָּן אָכַל תֹּאכַל “Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat.” What does this command mean? As R. Lichtenstein explains, we might think that “God has commanded us only with regard to certain areas of life, and that He has left a large neutral area where our own will and preferences find expression; [and in this area] we act as we want.” But that is not true. There isn't any part of our lives that is “devoid of God and His commanding presence.”

Though R. Lichtenstein distinguishes between those things that are obligatory, that are *mitzvot*, and those things that are optional, that are in the realm of *reshut*, they are both governed by God. “Thus, not only is abstaining from the tree of knowledge a realization of the divine command, but eating every other fruit in the Garden of Eden – and anywhere else – is likewise part of serving God, part of the realization of “the LORD God commanded.”<sup>1</sup>

In other words, God governs all aspects of our lives, not just those parts that we may classify as “religious.” He not only cares about our *mitzvot* – whether or not we *davened*, ate kosher food, or did *chesed* – He cares just as much about the world of *reshut*: what we watch on TV, which kosher

1. R. Dr. Aharon Lichtenstein, *Return and Renewal: Reflections of Teshuva and Spiritual Growth* (Maggid, 2018) 9.

foods we put in our mouths, and what we do in the voting booth. These things too are governed by God's will.

### III.

But there's a challenge with this. How do we know what we should do when there's no explicit halakhot to guide us? There's no *siman* in the *Shulchan Arukh* that tells us which television shows are appropriate, there's no *Masekhet Democracy*, in which *Chazal* debate whether to vote yes or no on that question about nurses that is dominating our airwaves, in which the vast majority of nurses are both for it and against it depending on who you listen to. How do we live our life in the total service of God when there is so much uncertainty?

I think part of the answer lies in the obligation upon every single one of us in learning the full spectrum of Torah sources. If we are familiar with the full gamut of Torah and halakhah, there are certain principles we can tease out to help guide us. It's not enough to know just *Chumash*, we must know how the Written Torah is interpreted by the Oral Torah. But if we stopped with the works of *Chazal* we wouldn't know of all the commentaries and codes that further refine what it means to live a Jewish life. If we immerse ourselves in the *Yam Shel Torah*, all the sources, in can help illuminate our path.

### IV.

But there's another principle we must internalize. And it requires us to go back to page 12:

וַיִּצַו יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים עַל-הָאָדָם לֵאמֹר מִכָּל עֵץ-הַגָּן אָכַל תֹּאכַל: וּמֵעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וְרָע  
לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ כִּי בַיּוֹם אָכַלְתָּ מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת תָּמוּת:

And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat; but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die." (Gen. 2:16-17)

But, if you now to turn to page 14, when Chava is confronted by the *nachash*, the serpent, she repeats this command differently:

וַתֹּאמֶר הָאִשָּׁה אֶל-הַנָּחַשׁ מִפִּי עֵץ-הַגָּן נֹאכַל: וּמִפִּי הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר בְּתוֹךְ-הַגָּן אָמַר  
אֱלֹהִים לֹא תֹאכְלוּ מִמֶּנּוּ וְלֹא תִגְעוּ בוֹ פֶן-תָּמוּתוּן:

The woman replied to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the other trees of the garden. It is only about fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said: 'You shall not eat of it nor touch it, lest you die.'" (Gen. 3:2-3)

Chava adds an additional element to the command, not original to God's instruction: *וְלֹא תִגְעוּ בוֹ* – you cannot touch the *etz ha-da'at*, the tree of knowledge. God only forbade its eating. He said

nothing about touching it. But Chava did. Whether she made up this exaggeration or had heard it from Adam, she adds a command not stated by God. It's the command that doesn't actually exist.

And this leads a well-known midrash to add to the narrative. How did the serpent convince Chava to eat the fruit of the *etz ha-da'at*? He pushed her onto the tree! He אמר לה הא לא מיתת – the serpent then said “see, you have not died – you touched it! Yet you didn't die! – so too will you not die from eating its fruit” (Gen. Rabbah 19:3). This, claims Rabbi Chiyya in the *midrash*, is the reason why we must be cautious with our stringencies. To claim something is forbidden when it is not destructive or, as captured poetically by him:

שלא תעשה את הגדר יותר מן העקר שלא יפל ויקצץ הנטיעות.

Don't make the fence larger than what it is protecting, lest it fall and destroy the plants.

But I think that there is a broader principle here, one that is fundamental to our observance of Judaism particularly to how we see God as governing *reshut*: we should be careful about claiming things in the name of God. While it is our duty to follow His laws as best we understand them, we should hesitate before stating that we know, in full certainty, what God wants from us and others. It is all too easy for us to become Chava and either exaggerate or repeat something we had actually heard from someone else – particularly in realms where there are no explicit *halakhot*.

In other words, as important as it is for us to realize that God governs all aspects of our lives, and it is our duty to plumb the depths of Torah in order to have the most informed opinion possible on the broad areas of our life, we can't be gung-ho about it. There's very little black-and-white. It's one thing to determine that some-things are appropriate for an observant life while other things are not, but it's another to claim that as the one true interpretation – we must be cautious in our claims. Yes, it's correct to believe that God cares about which lever you pull or box you tick in the voting booth, but you should also realize that you don't know which lever He actually wants you to pull.

We read this morning of two commands. The first didn't seem like a command but was, in fact, one of the most important of Judaism's principles: God cares about all we do, even if it doesn't seem, at first, to be religious. The second command, which was never a command except in error, teaches us a different principle: be cautious in what you claim. If there isn't an explicit halakhah to govern it, be careful when you claim such and such is what a religious person would do.

To borrow and adapt R. Chiyya's phrase: realize that there are far more plants in the garden than you think, but think twice before claiming that there is only one way to tend them.