

Guide of the Perplexed: Part One, Chapter II

Some years ago a learned man asked me a question of great importance; the problem and the solution which we gave in our reply deserve the closest attention. "It would appear from Scripture at first sight," said the objector, that man was originally intended to be perfectly equal to the rest of the animal creation, which is not endowed with intellect, reason, or power of distinguishing between good and evil: but that Adam's disobedience to the command of God procured him that great perfection which is the peculiarity of man, viz., the power of distinguishing between good and evil - the noblest of all the faculties of our nature, the essential characteristic of the human race. It thus appears strange that the punishment for rebelliousness should be the means of elevating man to a pinnacle of perfection to which he had not attained previously. This is equivalent to saying that a certain man was rebellious and extremely wicked, wherefore his nature was changed for the better, and he was made to shine as a star in the heavens."

Such was the purport and subject of the question, though not in the exact words of the inquirer. Now mark our reply, which was as follows: "You appear to have studied the matter superficially, and nevertheless you imagine that you can understand a book which has been the guide of past and present generations, when you for a moment withdraw from your lusts and appetites, and glance over its contents as if you were reading a historical work or some poetical composition. Collect your thoughts and examine the matter carefully, for it is not to be understood as you at first sight think, but as you will find after due deliberation; namely, the intellect which 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 image and likeness of God."

Man was certainly created from the outset with this. On account of this gift of intellect man was addressed by God, and received His commandments, as it is said: "And the Lord God commanded Adam" (Gen. ii. 16) – for no commandments are given to the brute creation or to those who are devoid of understanding. Through the intellect man distinguishes between the true and the false. This faculty Adam possessed perfectly and completely.

The right and the wrong are terms employed in the science of accepted conventions (mefursamot), not in that of rational knowledge (muskalot), as, e.g., it is not correct to say, in reference to the proposition "the heavens are spherical," it is "good" or to declare the assertion that "the earth is flat" to be "bad": but we say of the one it is true, of the other it is false. Similarly our language expresses the idea of true and false by the terms emet and sheker, but of the morally right and the morally wrong, by tov and ra. Thus it is the function of the intellect to discriminate between the true and the false – a distinction which is applicable to all objects of intellectual perception.

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" (Ps. viii. 6) he was not at all able to follow or to understand the principles of mefursamot; 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, "And the wife saw that the tree was good for food and delightful to the eyes" (Gen. iii. 6), he was punished by the loss of part of that intellectual faculty which he had previously possessed. He therefore transgressed a command with which he had been charged on the score of his reason; and having obtained a knowledge

of the mefursamot, he was wholly absorbed in the study of what is proper and what improper. Then he fully understood the magnitude of the loss he had sustained, what he had forfeited, and in what situation he was thereby placed. Hence we read, "And ye shall be like Elohim, knowing good and evil," and not knowing or discerning the true and the false: while with muskalot we can only apply the words "true and false," not "good and evil."

Before, however, entering upon this problem and its solution I must premise that every Hebrew knows that the term Elohim is a homonym, and denotes God, angels, judges, and the rulers of countries, and that Onkelos the proselyte explained it in the true and correct manner by taking Elohim in the sentence, "and you shall be like Elohim " (Gen. iii. 5) in the last-mentioned meaning, and rendering the sentence "and ye shall be like princes." Having pointed out the homonymity of the term "Elohim" we return to the question under consideration.

Further observe the passage, "And the eyes of both were opened, and they knew they were naked" (Gen. iii. 7): it is not said, "And the eyes of both were opened, and they saw "; for what the man had seen previously and what he saw after this circumstance was precisely the same: there had been no blindness which was now removed, but he received a new faculty whereby he found things wrong which previously he had not regarded as wrong. Besides, you must know that the Hebrew word pakach used in this passage is exclusively employed in the figurative sense of receiving new sources of knowledge, not in that of regaining the sense of sight. Comp., "God opened her eyes" (Gen. xxi. 19). "Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened" (Isaiah xxxviii. 8). "Open ears, he hears not" (ibid . Xlii. 20), similar in sense to the verse, "Which have eyes to see, and see not" (Ezek. xii. 2).

When, however, Scripture says of Adam, "He changed his face (panav) and thou sentest him forth" Job xiv. 20), it must be understood in the following way: On account of the change of his original aim he was sent away. For panim, the Hebrew equivalent of face, is derived from the verb panah , "he turned," and signifies also "aim," because man generally turns his face towards the thing he desires. In accordance with this interpretation, our text suggests that Adam, as he altered his intention and directed his thoughts to the acquisition of what he was forbidden, he was banished from Paradise: this was his punishment; it was measure for measure. At first he had the privilege of tasting pleasure and happiness, and of enjoying repose and security; but as his appetites grew stronger, and he followed his desires and impulses, (as we have already stated above), and partook of the food he was forbidden to taste, he was deprived of everything, was doomed to subsist on the meanest kind of food, such as he never tasted before, and this even only after exertion and labour, as it is said, "Thorns and thistles shall grow up for you " (Gen. iii. 18), "By the sweat of your brow," etc., and in explanation of this the text continues, "And the Lord God drove him from the Garden of Eden, to till the ground whence he was taken." He was now with respect to food and many other requirements brought to the level of the lower animals: comp., "you shall eat the grass of the field" (Gen. iii. 18). Reflecting on his condition, the Psalmist says, "Adam unable to dwell in dignity, was brought to the level of the dumb beast" (Ps. xlix. 13)." May the Almighty be praised, whose design and wisdom cannot be fathomed."

to'ar = physical appearance.

Tzelem = essence

Tzelem Elokim = sechel, i.e., the rational faculty.

Maimonides' Four Types of Knowledge

1. Rational Knowledge (muskalot): Objective and unchanging, relating to truth and falsehood; entirely independent of man.
2. Sensory knowledge (muchashot): E.g., cold, warmth, etc.
3. Traditional Knowledge (mekubalot): Acquired via tradition.
4. Accepted conventions (mefursamot): Universally understood ethical norms.