

Watch Out for That Tree!

Bereshit - 5782

In 1516, the philosopher, theologian, judge and humanist Thomas More described a distant island where everyone shares a common philosophy, culture and way of life. The evils that plague mankind cannot be found on this island, where everyone exists in a state of perpetual ecstasy. Life's mysteries were constantly unfolding, and people were always learning and becoming further enlightened. The name he gave the island was Utopia, which means "nowhere."

Some 460 years later, psychologists coined the term Utopia Syndrome¹ as the consequence of a person whose goals in life are grandiose, unrealistic and unattainable. Often, this triggers periods of withdrawal, sadness and even depression. Brief periods of euphoria, sometimes artificially induced by substances, are inevitably followed by a dose of grim reality. But there is another form of Utopia Syndrome, one that is far less extreme, but in a way, it is more painful. What if the island were a place one could reach- but when you arrive, you realize that it fails to live up to expectations?

The first promise of a utopian life is, of course, the idyllic existence in the Garden of Eden. But even there, where Adam and Chava were presented with everything they needed and anything they wanted, there was still something to desire, because it was withheld from

¹ Watzlawick, P., Weakland, J. H., & Fisch, R. (2011). *Change: Principles of problem formation and problem resolution* (Reprint ed.). W. W. Norton & Company.

them. It was the fruit of the tree of knowledge. When they finally did succumb, punishment was swift in coming, resulting in banishment from the Garden, and several ancillary punitive measures.

אַל־הָאִשָּׁה אָמַר הַרְבֵּה אֲרַבָּה **עֲצָבוֹנָהּ** וְהָרְוָהּ **בְּעָצָב** תִּלְדֵי בָנִים וְאֶל־אִישָׁ תִשְׁוָקֶתָּ וְהוּא יִמְשַׁלְּכָּךְ: [ס]

Genesis 3:16

And to the woman He said,

“I will make most severe

Your pangs in childbearing;

In pain shall you bear children.

Yet your urge shall be for your husband,

And he shall rule over you.

You will notice that the word עֲצָב, meaning sadness and pain, appears twice in the punishment of Chava, but she is not the only one.

וּלְאָדָם אָמַר כִּי־שָׂמַעְתָּ לְקוֹל אִשְׁתְּךָ וְתָאכַל מִזֶּה־הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִיךָ לֵאמֹר לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ אַרְוֶה הָאָדָמָה בְּעִבּוֹרְךָ **בְּעֲצָבוֹן**
תֹּאכְלֶנָּה כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ:

Genesis 3:17

To Adam He said, “Because you did as your wife said and ate of the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’
Cursed be the ground because of you;
By toil shall you eat of it
All the days of your life:

The great builder of Torah in Chicago, Rabbi Menachem Sacks, took note of the repetitive forms of this word in Adam and Eve’s punishment, in his Torah commentary titled *Menachem Tzion*. He commented that the tree of knowledge yielded sadness less as a punishment and more as a consequence of a utopian pursuit of complete satisfaction. As Rabbi Sacks put it, there are two emotions that are deadly to people- sadness and worry. Adam and Chava realized they were naked, meaning that they were aware of a lack they were experiencing in their lives. I’d like to take this a little further. What exactly is the difference between worry and sadness? Worry stems from unfulfilled desires, from envy that others have what we want, or the concern that we will never attain it ourselves. Sadness, however, often arises from actually getting what we want, when you finally taste the forbidden fruit and realize that it does not make you any happier

George Bernard Shaw put in best when he quipped:

“There are two tragedies in life. One is not to get your heart’s desire. The other is to get it”

Does this mean we should never dream, never hope, never aspire? Should we live small, unimaginative lives where we expect nothing for ourselves? It certainly is one way to avoid suffering worry and disappointment, but it is no way to live. Instead, our challenge is to aspire, but to manage our expectations- to be comfortable in the knowledge that we will never be able to fulfill every desire we have, and that some of those we do fulfill will feel anticlimactic.

On Shemini Atzeret, the world lost a brilliant, colorful and fearless giant in Torah and science, Rav Moshe David Tendler z”l. I had the honor of studying in his Bioethics class in college, and learned the laws of *milah* and conversion from him during my studies for Semicha, but more importantly, as you know, Rav Tendler was Rabbi Wolk’s *rebbe muvhak*. In fact, Rabbi Wolk is away this Shabbos because he traveled to Monsey for the funeral. Next Shabbos afternoon, between Mincha and Maariv, Rabbi Wolk will share recollections about his decades-long relationship with Rav Tendler, specifically in the context of halachic issues he brought to him. Nevertheless, we cannot let this Shabbat go by without saying something about him- or something from him. In a tribute video² made in his honor by his shul, The Community Synagogue of Monsey on the occasion of his 50th year as Rabbi there, he shared a most appropriate idea. Just a few moments ago, in the *bentching* of the month of Marcheshvan, we asked that God grant us a life in which ימלאו משאלות לבינו לטובה the desires of our hearts are fulfilled “for the good.” Rav Tendler noted that we do not ask God to grant

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https://vimeo.com/241944530?fbclid=IwAR0n9hjLbX2GRkY9qctgY2_56VdSjntAIYaEVBxNJ9vbeF2pp2mKdULf_P0

all our wishes, to answer *every* prayer- but rather, to do so לטובה. We ask Hashem to grant the good requests- the things we want that are good for us emotionally, that promote spiritual growth and that sustain us with what we need to survive and thrive. Contained within that carefully worded prayer is the request that God *deny* us the things that are detrimental to us. We don't want to be the lottery winner who regrets the day they ever set foot in the 7-11 to purchase that ticket; we don't want to be the genius who cannot abide the company of other human beings; we don't want the promotion that will take us away from our families and cause stress that is emotionally and physically dangerous. May we manage our expectations, and we always aspire to that which is best for us.