

Genesis 2:16-17

“Eating From the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil”

“The LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.’”

In the discussion surrounding the kosher dietary laws of the Torah, it cannot be overlooked that the first instruction given by God to human beings actually did pertain to not eating something. There is a significance to the opening word, *v’yetzav ADONAI Elohim al-ha’adam* (וַיִּצְוֵ יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים עַל-הָאָדָם), “And HASHEM God commanded the man” (v. 16a, ATS). The verb of note is *tzavah* (צָוָה), appearing in the Piel stem (intensive action, active voice), and meaning “to **give an order, command**” or “to **command, instruct, order**” (HALOT).¹ A. Cohen indicates in *The Soncino Chumash* how “The text is literally ‘commanded upon the man,’ and when the verb is followed by ‘upon’ it always denotes a prohibition.”² *V’yetzav...al-ha’adam* then carries with it some major significance, as prohibitions normally follow with penalties stated for violation, which they are in v. 17. It can actually be thought that there is a parallel between Genesis 2:16-17, and what is later witnessed in Moses’ instruction to Ancient Israel in Deuteronomy 30:15-18:

“See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, and death and adversity; in that I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments, that you may live and multiply, and that the LORD your God may bless you in the land where you are entering to possess it. But if your heart turns away and you will not obey, but are drawn away and worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall surely perish. You will not prolong *your* days in the land where you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess it.”

Within God’s instruction of Genesis 2:16-17, it cannot be avoided that there were many trees in the Garden of Eden, all permitted to be eaten from, **with the exception of a single tree**. Adam was told *m’kol eitz-ha’gan akol tokeil* (מִכָּל עֵץ-הַגָּן אָכַל הָאֵכֶל), “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely” (v. 16, NASU), *akol tokeil* also rendered as “surely eat” (ESV), “free to eat” (NIV, NJPS, HCSB), or “to-eat you-may-eat” (Kohlenberger).³ David Atkinson comments how this is a major indication of the freedom available from God to Adam in His garden:

“[I]n God’s Garden, there is freedom. ‘*You may freely eat*’ (2:16) probably means ‘You may eat to the full’...The man, as we might say, has a free run of the place. It is his to enjoy with no constraint—save one. The one restrictive command of verse 17 is the only boundary within which there is freedom.”⁴

The restrictive direction is given in v. 17a: *u’m’eitz ha’da’at tov v’ra lo tokal* (וּלֹא תֹאכַל מִן-עֵץ הַדְּעִיָּה טוֹב וְרָע), “but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it” (NJPS). The ensuing penalty for eating of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil/Bad will be death (Heb. verb *mut*, מוּת), which given a further reading of Scripture involves

¹ HALOT, 2:1010, 1011.

² A. Cohen, ed., *The Soncino Chumash* (Brooklyn: Soncino Press, 1983), 10.

³ John R. Kohlenberger III, trans., *The Interlinear NIV Hebrew-English Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 1:5.

⁴ Atkinson, pp 62-63.

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both spiritual and physical dimensions.⁵ It is useful to note how later in Genesis 24:50, Laban and Bethuel state, “The matter comes from the LORD; so we cannot speak to you bad or good,” *ra o-tov* (רַע אִי-טוֹב) actually being rendered in the NIV as “one way or the other.” And so with this in mind, good and evil/bad in terms of the forbidden fruit, may additionally be taken as representative of people taking control or advantage of things, when God’s own judgment and rules must be followed.

As the later narrative reveals (Genesis 3:6-7), Adam and Eve—as the fruit “was a delight⁶ to the eyes” (Genesis 3:6)—ate the forbidden fruit. While we cannot know for certain what this fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil actually looked like, we do know that it represented something released into the conscience and psyche of humanity, which has plagued people ever since Adam and Eve ate it. Various suggestions have certainly been made regarding what the forbidden fruit caused, including:

- omniscience
- sexual awareness
- moral discernment/discrimination
- moral autonomy/awareness⁷

The two final options, that the forbidden fruit introduced some sort of moral discernment/discrimination or moral autonomy/awareness into people, is where the most amount of theological exploration and speculation will rest. The main point, of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit, is that they ultimately fell prey to the temptation that they could be in control of things without the direction of God. John H. Sailhamer astutely observes,

“The inference of God’s commands in vv.16-17 is that God alone knows what is good (*tôb*) for man and that God alone knows what is not good (*ra’*) for him. To enjoy the ‘good’ man must trust God and obey him. If man disobeys, he will have to decide for himself what is good (*tôb*) and what is not good (*ra’*). While to modern man such a prospect may seem desirable, to the author of Genesis it is the worst fate that could have befallen him. Only God knows what is good (*tôb*) for man. Only God can know what is good.”⁸

A violation or a breach of God’s instruction by the first people, may thusly be considered a violation of God’s trust and of God’s intention for providing a special garden where the man and woman would be able to intimately commune with Him. At the same time, though, it cannot go unnoticed—as we are looking back many millennia since—that Adam and Eve also possessed some degree of naïveté in eating the forbidden fruit. Surely, if they had any hint of an idea about what would have ensued following their sin against the Lord, logically they would have refused the fruit. It cannot go overlooked that also in

⁵ Consult the relevant discussions involving human composition in the publications *To Be Absent From the Body and Why Hell Must Be Eternal* by J.K. McKee.

⁶ Heb. *ta'avah* (תַּאֲוָה); “Desire, pleasant, lust, greed, dainty, desirable...this noun has the meaning of ‘desire’ extending to both good and bad objects” (Robert L. Alden, “ta’āvâ,” in *TWOT*, 1:18).

⁷ Cf. Gordon J. Wenham, “Genesis,” in James D.G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson, eds., *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 40; T. Desmond Alexander, “Genesis,” in Wayne Grudem, ed., *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 54.

⁸ John H. Sailhamer, “Genesis,” in Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. et. al., *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 2:45.

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violating God's instruction to not eat the fruit, that they rejected a directive which had the intent of protecting them from harm. As John E. Hartley correctly summarizes,

"By giving humans such a prohibition, God was mercifully providing them a tangible symbol of their moral nature. Some people argue, however, that the presence of this tree made it impossible for humans not to sin, given the human proclivity to do what is prohibited. But those who hold this position fail to consider that the first humans did not yet have any inclination of asserting themselves above God. It is difficult for us on this side of Eden to discern how a limit guards freedom rather than serving as a temptation to do what is forbidden. God was protecting human freedom by setting this restriction."⁹

Indeed, while most serious, the infraction committed by Adam and Eve is not at all on the same level of the Genesis 11:1-9 scene of the Tower of Babel—where humanity really did intend to try to reach into the sky, and to some degree, if you will, "conquer God."

While Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit is a grave crime that all human beings since have had to contend with, and need redemption from (cf. Romans 5:12)—does eating the forbidden fruit have any sort of relation to the dietary instructions given later in the Torah? Is there anything to be detected or considered from Genesis 2:16-17, which inform us of the tenor of further instructions in the Pentateuch? In his *Pentateuch & Haftorahs*, J.H. Hertz actually labels the direction of Genesis 2:16-17 as a "dietary law," and asks readers to consider the self-discipline required of God's people from the first command given to human beings:

"This sharp limitation of self-gratification, this 'dietary law', was to test the use he would make of his freedom; and it thus begins the discipline of man. Unlike the beast, man has also a spiritual life, which demands the subordination of man's desires to the law of God. The will of God revealed in His Law is the one eternal and unfailing guide as to what constitutes good and evil—and not man's instincts, or even his Reason, which in the hour of temptation often call light darkness and darkness light."¹⁰

Jewish commentator Nahum Sarna further states, "Unrestricted freedom does not exist. Man is called upon by God to exercise restraint and self-discipline in the gratification of his appetite. This prohibition is the paradigm for the future Torah legislation relating to the dietary laws."¹¹

Unlike the violation of eating the forbidden fruit, there is no capital or death penalty of any sort associated with people eating the unclean meats of Leviticus 11 or Deuteronomy 14. Yet, the Hebrew Scriptures do not see people in solely spiritual or physical terms. While it is important for people to surely reflect upon God and His ways, His holiness, and His righteousness *and* their thoughts and attitudes—God also requires His own to discipline themselves physically, and the Torah will include instructions about how they are to eat. Given the disastrous consequences associated with eating the wrong thing in Genesis 2:16-17, it should give skeptical Bible readers at least some reason to pause, in their reading and reflection upon the kosher dietary laws.

⁹ John E. Hartley, *New International Bible Commentary: Genesis* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 61.

¹⁰ Hertz, 8.

¹¹ Sarna, *Genesis*, 21.