

Bereishis and the Calculations That Hold Us Back

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Based on the drash of Rav Goel Elkarif in Naeh Doresh on Parshas Bereishis

This week's main Shabbos drash

If you plan to be in shul for the drash, please do not read it beforehand.

When the next step cannot wait

Last week, many of us followed the frightening reports about flydubai Flight 1073, traveling from Dubai to Tel Aviv on September 30. The co-pilot reportedly attacked the captain, and the aircraft plunged. The wounded captain managed to open the cockpit door; passengers intervened, and a reserve crew brought the plane safely to the ground in Saudi Arabia.

Think about the people who helped. They could not know, in that moment, how the whole ordeal would end. They could not guarantee that their efforts would succeed. Yet they understood that lives depended on what they did next.

There are moments when we must decide what is our responsibility before we can know what will be the result.

That is a question Bereishis brings into our spiritual lives. Of course we must think, plan, and use the abilities Hashem has given us. But what happens when we insist on knowing the outcome before we will do what is asked of us? What happens when our calculations become a reason to turn away from a responsibility that is already clear?

Adam and Chavah reworked a clear command until another course seemed permissible. Lemech's wives looked toward a frightening future and concluded that they should not build a family. And a girl from a broken home faced a choice about her own future, with no money and no assurance of how things would work out.

As we open the Torah again, let us ask: **Are our calculations helping us fulfill our responsibility, or persuading us to escape it?**

One prohibition in Gan Eden

We have just completed a remarkable month. We stood before Hashem on Rosh Hashanah. We asked for forgiveness on Yom Kippur. We sat in the sukkah, and we danced with the Torah. Now we open the Torah again, and we meet the first human being.

Adam HaRishon was not an ordinary person struggling to discover whether there is a Creator. He was the handiwork of Hashem. Chazal describe his extraordinary stature. The Gemara in Sanhedrin describes the angels mistaking him for a being before whom they should offer praise, until Hashem caused him to sleep and they recognized their mistake.

That is the person we are discussing. And what was he asked to do? There was one tree from which he was not permitted to eat.

Think about that. We struggle with so many obligations, so many temptations, so many competing demands. Adam had the garden before him. He had so much that was permitted. And there was one prohibition.

How could someone on his level fail?

For a Jew accustomed to keeping kosher, a piece of obviously nonkosher food may present no temptation at all. He simply would not eat it. How, then, could Adam HaRishon fail over a food that Hashem had expressly forbidden?

There is another difficulty. The pasuk says:

רָגְלֵי חֲסִידָיו יִשְׁמֹר

“He guards the feet of His faithful ones.” (I Shmuel 2:9)

There is special protection afforded to tzaddikim against stumbling over forbidden food. How could Adam fall deliberately?

To understand the answer, we have to look beneath the act of eating. Before the hand reached for the fruit, something had already happened in the mind.

When a clear command becomes a calculation

One explanation is that the root of the sin was introducing uncertainty into an instruction that had been clear. The yetzer hara unsettled what Adam knew, planting a question where there had been certainty: Who says this is really forbidden? Perhaps the instruction can be understood differently.

That is an unsettling thought. A person does not always begin by saying, “I want to disobey Hashem.” Sometimes he begins by explaining why, in this particular situation, obedience requires something different from what Hashem actually said.

To understand Chavah's calculation, we have to follow the distinctions carefully. Hashem's command to Adam was:

וַיִּמְעַץ הַדֵּעַת טוֹב וְרַע לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ, כִּי בַיּוֹם אֲכָלְךָ מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת תָּמוּת.

“But from the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for on the day that you eat from it, you shall surely die.” (Bereishis 2:17)

When Chavah spoke to the nachash, she described the prohibition this way:

וּמִפְרֵי הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר בְּתוֹךְ הַגֶּן אָמַר אֱלֹקִים לֹא תֹאכְלוּ מִמֶּנּוּ.

“But of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, G-d said: You shall not eat from it.” (Excerpt from Bereishis 3:3)

Notice her wording: the fruit of the tree. The derash explains how the nachash exploited a distinction between the fruit and the tree itself. His argument was: Do not eat the fruit. But who said you cannot eat the tree itself? The prohibition, he claimed, concerned the fruit, not the wood of the tree.

How could someone eat a tree? Here is the essential detail: in this derash, the Tree of Knowledge was a tree whose wood tasted like its fruit. Its wood was edible and had the taste of the fruit. Chavah could therefore be tempted to eat the tree itself.

Now read the next pasuk carefully:

וַיֵּרָא הָאִשָּׁה כִּי טוֹב הָעֵץ לְמֹאכָל וְכִי תִאֲוָה הוּא לְעֵינָיִם וְנִחְמַד הָעֵץ לְהַשְׁכִּיל, וַתִּקַּח מִפְרִיו וַתֹּאכַל, וַתֵּתֵן גַּם לְאִישָׁהּ עִמָּהּ וַיֹּאכַל.

“The woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was a desire to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable for gaining wisdom. She took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave to her husband with her, and he ate.” (Bereishis 3:6)

First the pasuk says that the tree was good for food. Then it says that she took its fruit. The derash reads a progression here. She began by accepting the supposed permission to eat the edible tree. That was the first breach.

Once she had crossed that line, the nachash pressed further. She had already stumbled, he argued; she might as well eat the fruit too and gain the promised knowledge of good and evil. The pasuk moves from the tree being good for food to her taking its fruit.

The calculation did not keep her within the command. It brought her across the boundary, and then made the next violation easier.

But there was another distinction when she approached Adam. Following the opinion that the forbidden fruit was grapes, the derash describes her proposing that the grapes be squeezed and their juice drunk. Hashem had forbidden eating, she reasoned. Perhaps drinking was different.

Now the distinction was between the grape and its juice, between eating and drinking. Adam accepted a calculation presented to him as a way to avoid the prohibition while still obtaining what came from the fruit.

The Gemara discusses distinctions between eating a food and drinking a liquid derived from it in the laws of vows. But the discussion cited here also recognizes the nourishing character of the liquid. What comes from the food may still nourish the person who drinks it. Turning the fruit into a drink did not remove the spiritual consequence bound up with consuming it.

Follow the two stages. Chavah was drawn into distinguishing the fruit from the edible tree, whose wood tasted like its fruit. Adam was drawn into distinguishing the grapes from their juice, and eating from drinking. In each case, a clear instruction was being reworked into a supposed permission.

That is the danger. A person can keep making distinctions until he persuades himself that the act he wants to do is compatible with the command he received.

The instructions had been clear. The calculation made them complicated.

And Adam had a calculation of his own. The angels' response to him gave him reason to fear that he might become proud. In this explanation, he thought: If I remain at this extraordinary level, perhaps I will fall into arrogance. Perhaps I will even be drawn toward avodah zarah. Better to become smaller. Better to come down from this height.

Listen to how serious that sounds. Concern about arrogance. Concern about avodah zarah. A desire to avoid a terrible spiritual danger.

Yet Hashem had not told him to lower himself by eating from the tree. Adam's task was to obey the command he had received. Hashem could protect him from the danger he feared. By arranging his own solution, he brought about an actual failure to prevent a possible one.

That brings us to the pasuk in Koheles:

לְבַד רָאִה זֶה מִצְאָתִי, אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה הָאֱלֹקִים אֶת הָאָדָם יֹשֶׁר, וְהֵמָּה בִקְשׁוּ חֲשִׁבֹנוֹת רַבִּים.

“Only this have I found: that G-d made man upright, but they sought many calculations.”
(Koheles 7:29)

Hashem made man upright. A straight path was available. The many calculations bent it away from where it was supposed to lead.

We need to understand this carefully. The Torah requires thought. We have to plan responsibly, seek advice, and understand our obligations. The question is what our thinking serves. Does it help us carry out Hashem's will? Or does it become an ingenious explanation for why we should set that will aside?

The most persuasive excuse may be the one that sounds like a mitzvah.

Lemech and the future of his children

Later in the parsha, this same issue appears in a different form. Now the calculation concerns children and the future of the world.

Rashi tells us that Lemech's wives separated from him because they did not want to bring children into the world. They knew that the descendants of Kayin were destined to perish. Lemech was the seventh generation, and they anticipated the fulfillment of that decree. Why give birth to children who would face destruction?

This is a very different kind of argument from selfishness. They were thinking about the children. They were thinking about what those children would have to endure. Their conclusion seemed responsible: If the future is so terrible, perhaps the kindest thing is not to bring them into it.

Lemech brought the matter before Adam HaRishon. The wives explained their concern. What purpose would there be in having children when disaster lay ahead?

Adam told them to fulfill Hashem's will. If Hashem has instructed you to build a family, build a family. The future of Kayin's descendants is not yours to settle through your own calculation.

There is something deeply striking about Adam giving that answer. At the beginning of the parsha, we have seen what happened when he sought to protect his spiritual future through a calculation that displaced Hashem's command. Now he tells the next generations to do what Hashem requires and leave the ultimate future in His hands.

Now look at what actually happened.

Lemech married Adah and Tzillah. Tzillah bore Tuval Kayin and Naamah. Rashi identifies Naamah as the wife of Noach.

Think about the force of that detail. These women were worried that the future would end in destruction. Yet from this family came the woman who would survive the destruction and help establish the future of humanity.

And Naamah's own story makes the point stronger. In this account, she was already a thousand years old and had remained unmarried. She had not found a husband because the men around her were wicked. She refused to marry one of them.

She was prepared to wait rather than abandon the kind of life she knew she should build. Eventually she married Noach. The descendants of Kayin perished, yet she survived, and humanity continued through her.

Think about the different calculations. Her parents could have said: There is no future for a child in this family. Naamah could have said: At my age, I must accept whoever is available. Instead, a future that nobody could have predicted emerged through fidelity to Hashem.

The flood came. The catastrophe they feared was real. Nevertheless, the conclusion they would have drawn from that catastrophe was wrong.

Had they refused to have children on the basis of their calculation, they would have excluded the very child through whom humanity would continue.

They saw destruction ahead. They could not see who would come through it.

This is why Lemech's part of the drash matters so much. It brings the idea into an area where our fears can be most powerful. We want to protect our children. We want to know that the life we build will have a future. We would like some assurance before we begin.

But even when we know something about the future, we do not know everything about it. We do not know every child, every possibility, every door Hashem may open.

Our responsibility is to fulfill the obligation before us. The entire history that will unfold from it is beyond our sight.

A difficult guest in a beis midrash

There was a family in Petach Tikvah. It was a religious family in very difficult financial circumstances. The father was an alcoholic.

When the older daughter reached the age to attend seminary, she left the religious path and left home. Later, she tried to draw her younger sister after her. Instead of going to seminary, she said, the younger girl should go out to work and earn money.

The younger girl did not listen. She remained on the path of Beis Yaakov.

What helped save her? To understand that, we first have to follow something that happened to her father.

One day he passed a beis midrash in the city. He went inside and found coffee and cakes. He began coming regularly.

There was a kollel learning there. At first, the avreichim treated him pleasantly. They tried to draw him closer. But after several days, their patience wore thin. It was very hard to tolerate his presence. The smell of alcohol was so strong that the account describes him as a walking bottle of alcohol.

They approached the Rosh Kollel and asked him to tell the man to find somewhere else.

When the Rosh Kollel returned home, he told his wife about the man coming to the kollel and their uncertainty about what to do with him.

His wife told him that she had that day attended a Torah lecture and heard a story connected to this very issue. She repeated it to her husband.

At a yeshiva in central Israel, a Jewish man once arrived and asked to sleep in the dormitory. From his appearance and the smell coming from him, it was evident that he had not washed for a long time. He was exhausted and wanted to sleep.

The boys naturally resisted. It was very unpleasant to have a man in that condition sleeping in their room. One of the boys, however, came from a poor family and knew what deprivation meant. He approached the visitor and invited him into his room to sleep on his bed.

The visitor was hungry. The boy went to the dining room and gathered a few leftover rolls and pieces of fruit. He prepared a cup of tea. The visitor ate everything, got into the bed, and slept through the night.

Nobody knew who this man was. One must not simply suspect a person without cause, but practical precautions were necessary. They could not leave him unsupervised. There had been cases of thieves entering dormitory rooms and leaving with a good deal of stolen property.

The boy sat on a chair in the room for the entire night.

In the morning, the visitor awoke after a sound night's sleep. He found it difficult to express his gratitude to the boy. He left and went on his way. The boy washed the bedding with a generous amount of cleaning fluid to remove the smell.

Some time passed. The boy reached marriageable age. When he became engaged, he received no money from his parents; they had none to give. He received a letter from America. If the couple needed money, the writer said, he would give it to them.

The couple did need money. The bride's family had limited means. The man sent them five thousand dollars.

What could they do with that amount? The young man took a large mortgage and several additional loans, and they bought a small apartment in central Jerusalem, where he could live near his learning.

Over the years, Hashem blessed them with more children. Eventually, the family sold that small apartment and moved into a large, spacious apartment worth several million shekels.

The former yeshiva student later related that he was certain he had merited that siyata diShmaya in the merit of what he had done when he gave that exhausted stranger his own bed.

That was the story the Rosh Kollel's wife repeated. Then she told her husband: If the man wants to rest and sleep in your beis midrash, do not put him out.

The Rosh Kollel listened to her. He allowed the man to remain.

A girl who wanted a different future

His daughter completed eighth grade. It was time to enroll in seminary.

Her teacher spoke with her and encouraged her to go. The girl explained that her older sister was telling her to go to work and not even try a Charedi seminary. Nothing would come of her, her sister said.

The girl said that she did want to go to seminary. **She had seen how kindly the kollel treated her father, even in his drunken condition.** The avreichim helped him and gave him money. Their kindness made her want to continue along their Torah path.

That is the crucial connection. The way they treated her father showed her something about the life she wanted for herself. When the Rosh Kollel allowed him to remain, he could not have known that his decision would help draw the man's daughter toward a Torah future.

But there was another problem: seminary cost money. Nobody in the world would pay for her. Her father did not work. He was addicted to alcohol.

The teacher told her to remove that worry from her heart. The teacher would take responsibility for enrolling her, and she would take responsibility for the tuition.

She enrolled the girl in the Bnei Brak seminary Ohr HaChaim. At the same time, she approached large charitable organizations and asked for their help paying the tuition.

For various reasons, their answers were negative. The teacher became very worried. Where would the money come from? She could not pay the tuition out of her own pocket.

She discussed the problem with her husband. He suggested another possibility. A benefactor from overseas supported the kollel in which he learned. Each year, the benefactor came to Eretz Yisrael together with his wife on his father's yahrtzeit. He came to the kollel, and the Rosh Kollel gave a special mussar shiur in his father's memory. They learned mishnayos for the niftar's neshamah. There was a meal for the avreichim, and the benefactor gave everyone a grant.

The yahrtzeit was approaching. The husband suggested that his wife tell the benefactor's wife about the girl.

She did. She described the student and the family's difficult financial situation. The benefactor's wife told her husband.

He found it hard to believe. He had not realized that families in Israel lived in circumstances like these. He wanted to see the family himself.

He went to their home and was shocked. It was a neglected apartment. The paint was peeling from the walls. The floor was broken. There were worn-out pipes and dripping water. The refrigerator stood empty.

He decided to act. He paid for a comprehensive renovation of the apartment, down to its foundations. During the renovation, he rented a spacious apartment for the family. He also paid the student's tuition at Ohr HaChaim for two years in advance.

The girl had entered the seminary without knowing who would pay. Her teacher had taken responsibility without knowing which appeal would succeed. The first requests had failed. Yet a door opened that neither of them had been able to foresee.

And now we come to the girl's own words. I want to give you her testimony as it is recorded, because she explains what was at stake far better than we could explain it for her.

Her own words

The student completed the school year. At the end-of-year ceremony at the seminary, she stood up to speak. These were her words:

“Before I entered the seminary, my older sister tried to persuade me not to study at the seminary, because nothing would come of me, and I would remain with nothing. On the scales stood my choice—either material life or spiritual life. I saw what had happened to my sister who had thrown off the yoke. I do not want to follow her path. I decided to walk with the Holy One, blessed be He, to follow His path. In this way, I would care not only for my own spiritual life, but also for that of the children I would have one day, and not only theirs, but that of all the coming generations who would descend from me.

“Had I begun to weigh things and calculate them, it is very possible that I would not have taken this step. But I did not think too much. I proceeded with simple faith, without trying to outsmart things. And, blessed be Hashem, I saw open miracles. I entered the seminary. I completed the school year successfully. My teacher undertook to take care of my tuition. She approached charitable funds but received no response. Yet it became clear that this was for the good. From Heaven they sent a good messenger who paid my tuition for me. But he did not content himself with that, and he financed the renovation of our home. Now a new life has opened up for my whole family.”

The generations we cannot yet see

Do you hear how she speaks about her future? She is still a young girl. She is struggling to find money for her own education. And she is thinking about children she does not yet have, and generations she will never meet.

That takes us directly back to Lemech's wives.

They were concerned about their children's future. Their calculation led them to withhold that future. This girl was concerned about her children's future. Her decision led her to build it.

The difference was where each placed the limit of her own knowledge. Lemech's wives believed that what they could foresee settled the question. This girl knew that the financial problem was real, but she did not treat it as proof that a Torah future was impossible.

She accepted help. Her teacher worked to find money. The benefactor investigated the circumstances and acted. There was effort all along the way. Her temimus gave that effort its direction.

And the same question comes to us as we begin the year.

We may have resolved to return to a shiur, to make our davening more attentive, or to do something for another person that we have postponed. During Yom Tov, the decision seemed clear. Now ordinary life returns, and so do the calculations.

Will I keep it up? Will it make enough difference? What if I begin and it does not turn out as I hope?

We should think about how to make a commitment workable. We should seek advice when we need it. But we should also recognize the moment when thinking stops helping us begin and starts giving us permission never to begin.

Adam had one clear instruction. He imagined that he could protect himself by taking another path. Lemech's wives could foresee destruction, but could not foresee Naamah. The girl could see an empty refrigerator and unpaid tuition, but could not see the help that would come.

We also see only part of the story.

Hashem has given us a Torah to guide the part that is ours to live. When the next right step is clear, we can take it with thought, with effort, and with trust.

We do not need to know how the whole story ends before we do the right thing in the next chapter.

Opening news source: Reuters, "What do we know about flydubai flight 1073?", October 2, 2026. Incident: September 30, 2026.