

— BEREISHIT 2 · 3 —

חַטָּא עֵץ הַדַּעַת

Did Adam Fall Up?

The Torah describes Adam's sin as a disaster. It brought death into the world, and Adam was sent out of Gan Eden. But some Jewish thinkers say there is more to the story: God planned for it, and some even say Adam meant well. This page shows what the sources actually say.

MOREH NEVUCHIM 1:2

The Rambam already heard this idea

Some people say the sin made us better. That idea is not new. Someone asked the Rambam about it over 800 years ago, and he said no.

Here is the idea. Before Adam ate, he did not know right from wrong. Eating the fruit gave him that knowledge, and the ability to choose. So, the argument goes, the sin actually made him better.

The Rambam writes about this question at the start of his book of Jewish philosophy, the **Moreh Nevuchim** (Guide for the Perplexed), Part 1, chapter 2. A scholar asked him: if the fruit gave Adam the ability to know good from evil, then God rewarded him for disobeying. That makes no sense. It would be like a criminal being turned into a star in the sky as his "punishment."

וזה הפלא, שיהיה ענשו על מריו תת לו שלמות שלא היה לו, והוא השכל!

"This is very strange: his punishment for disobeying was to be given something great he never had before, a mind!"

MOREH NEVUCHIM 1:2 · THE QUESTION

The Rambam answers that the question is built on a mistake. Adam already had a full mind before he ate. That is what it means that he was created *b'tzelem Elokim*, in God's image. It is also why God could give him a command at all. You don't give commands to an animal.

The Rambam explains that the mind deals with **true and false** (שֶׁקֶר and אֱמֶת). "Good and bad" in this story means something lower: what looks nice and what looks embarrassing. That is a matter of opinion, not facts. You would never call a math fact "nice" or "ugly." It is just true or false.

ובשכל יבדיל האדם בין האמת והשקר... אמנם המגונה והנאה, הוא במפורסמות לא במושכלות.

"With the mind, a person tells true from false. But 'nice' and 'ugly' are a matter of opinion, not of what the mind knows."

MOREH NEVUCHIM 1:2

So for the Rambam, the fruit did not make Adam smarter. It made him worse. He followed what looked good to him, *"the tree was good to eat and pleasing to the eyes"* (Bereishit 3:6). After he ate, he started judging things by how they look instead of by what is true. That is why the Torah says "their eyes were opened and they knew they were naked." They did not see anything new. They saw the same things, but now they felt embarrassed.

Keep the Rambam in mind as you read the rest of this page. Anyone who says the sin was a step up has to deal with his answer.

SANHEDRIN 38B

Adam's first day, hour by hour

The Gemara lists what happened in each of the twelve hours of the sixth day. Adam was sent out of Gan Eden before night.

Hour 1 • Dust

הוּצָבַר עָפָר

His dust was gathered.

The Gemara says the dust came from all over the world: his body from Bavel, his head from Eretz Yisrael, and his arms and legs from other lands.

Hour 2 • Form

נַעֲשָׂה גּוֹלֵם

He became a golem: a body with no life in it yet.

Hour 3 • Body

נִמְתָּחוּ אַבְרָיו

His arms and legs were stretched out.

Hour 4 • Soul

נִזְרְקָה בוֹ נֶשְׁמָה

God put a soul into him.

"And He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (Bereishit 2:7). From this hour on, Adam has a soul and a mind.

Hour 5 • Rises

עָמַד עַל רַגְלָיו

He stood up.

Hour 6 • Names

קָרָא שְׁמוֹת

He named the animals.

Adam names all the animals (Bereishit 2:19-20) before he ever eats from the tree. That shows he was already very smart before the sin. This is the Rambam's point: the fruit did not give Adam his mind.

Hour 7 • Chava

נִדְוֶנָּה לוֹ חַוָּה

Chava was paired with him.

Hour 8 • Family

עָלוּ לַמִּטָּה שְׁנַיִם וַיָּרְדּוּ אַרְבָּעָה

Two went up to bed, and four came down.

Their first children were born that same day. The Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 22:2) says Kayin and Hevel were born with twin sisters. So the first family started in Gan Eden, before the sin.

Hour 9 • Order

נִצְטְוָה שְׁלֹא לֶאֱכֹל מִן הָאֵילָן

God commanded him not to eat from the tree.

Only one thing was forbidden. Everything else was allowed: "From every tree of the garden you may eat" (Bereishit 2:16). The command lasted just one hour before he broke it.

Hour 10 • Sin

סָרַח

He sinned.

The Gemara does not use the usual word for sin, חָטָא. It uses סָרַח, a word for going astray. The Torah uses the same root for the extra curtain that hung over the edge of the Mishkan (Shemot 26:12), so the word also suggests going past a limit. Notice the timing too: this is only a couple of hours before Shabbat. The Ohr HaChaim quotes Chazal that if Adam had waited until Shabbat, he could have made Kiddush on wine from that tree (Ohr HaChaim on Bereishit 1:29).

Hour 11 • Trial

נִידוֹן

He was judged.

God starts with a question: אַיֶּכָּה, "Where are you?" (Bereishit 3:9). The Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 19:9) reads it as אַיֶּכָּה, "How could this happen?", the first word of Eichah: "Yesterday you listened to Me, and today you listened to the snake."

Hour 12 • Exile

נִטְרַד וְהִלָּךְ לוֹ

He was sent out of Gan Eden.

The Gemara's proof: אָדָם בִּיקָר בֶּל יָלִין, "a person in his greatness did not stay the night" (Tehillim 49:13). Adam did not last one night in Gan Eden. Right after this, the first Shabbat began.

BEREISHIT 3:22

What changed when Adam ate?

Everyone agrees that something changed. They disagree about what, and whether it was good or bad.

Rambam

MOREH NEVUCHIM 1:2

BEFORE: TRUE AND FALSE

AFTER: NICE AND EMBARRASSING

ובשכל יבדיל האדם בין האמת והשקר

והגיעה לו השגת המפורסמות

Adam had a full mind. He judged things by whether they were true or false. Being undressed did not embarrass him, because the mind does not deal with embarrassment.

Now he judged things by how they look: nice or embarrassing. He saw the same things as before, but now he felt ashamed.

Bottom line: the sin made him worse. He already had his mind; the fruit clouded it.

Ramban

BEREISHIT 2:9 AND 3:22

BEFORE: DOING WHAT IS RIGHT NATURALLY

הָאָדָם הָיָה עוֹשֶׂה בְּטִבְעוֹ מִה שֶׁרְאוּי לַעֲשׂוֹת

Adam did the right thing naturally, the way the sun and stars follow their path. He did not have strong personal wants. His body did not embarrass him.

AFTER: PERSONAL WILL AND DESIRE

וּפְרִי הָאֵילָן הָיָה מוֹלִיד הָרָצוֹן וְהַחֲפֶז

The fruit gave him personal wants, so he could choose one thing or its opposite. The Ramban says *da'at* here means wanting, as in "I have known you by name," meaning "I have chosen you."

Bottom line: both good and bad. Choosing is a Godly trait, but it comes with desires.

Nefesh HaChaim

GATE 1, CHAPTER 6, NOTE

BEFORE: EVIL WAS OUTSIDE HIM

וכחות הרע היו עומדים לצד, וענין בפני עצמו חוץ ממנו

Adam had full free will, but evil was outside him, like fire is outside a person who could choose to walk into it. That is why the snake had to tempt him from outside.

AFTER: EVIL IS INSIDE US

אז נתערבו הכחות הרע בתוכו ממש

Good and evil got mixed inside people. Now the urge to sin feels like it is coming from us. Even our good deeds are often mixed with other motives.

Bottom line: Adam had free will before the fruit too. What changed is that the temptation moved inside.

Sefat Emet

BEREISHIT 5650 AND 5657

BEFORE: FULLY CONNECTED TO GOD

בדביקות האחדות ממש

Adam was so close to God that he did not feel separate. He did not need to earn anything, and he had nothing to be embarrassed about.

AFTER: SEPARATED, SO WE CHOOSE

רק אחר הפירוד הי' הבושת, לכן הי' העצה ע"י הבחירה

The snake offered independence: "to be on his own." What he got was distance from God and shame. Free choice became the way to get close again.

Bottom line: free choice is the way back, not a prize for sinning. Being sent out was also a mission.

The Ramban says the change was good in one way and bad in another:

וְהָיָה אַחֲרֵי אֲכָלוֹ מִן הָעֵץ הָיְתָה בְּיָדוֹ הַבְּחִירָה... וְזוֹ מִדָּה אֱלֹהִית מֵצֵד אֶחָד, וְרָעָה לָאָדָם בְּהִיּוֹת לוֹ בַּהּ יֵצֶר וְתַאֲוָה.

"After he ate from the tree, he had the power to choose... This is a Godly trait in one way, and bad for a person in another way, because it comes with a yetzer hara and desires."

RAMBAN, BEREISHIT 2:9

In other words: acting from your own will is something God does, so in that way it is a Godly trait. But for a human being with a body, it also comes with cravings.

After the sin, God says: הָיָה הָאָדָם כְּאֶחָד מֵעַמּוֹ לְדַעַת טוֹב וְרָע, "man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil" (Bereishit 3:22). Onkelos translates it: man is now **one of a kind in the world, able to decide on his own**. The Rambam uses this verse as his source for free will.

הֵן מִין זֶה אָדָם הָיָה יָחִיד בְּעוֹלָם... שִׁיָּהָא הוּא מַעֲצָמוּ בְּדַעְתּוֹ וּבְמַחֲשַׁבְתּוֹ יוֹדֵעַ הַטּוֹב וְהָרָע, וְעוֹשֶׂה כָּל מָה שֶׁהוּא חָפֵץ.

"Human beings are one of a kind in the world: on their own, with their own mind, they know good and evil, and they can do whatever they want."

RAMBAM, HILCHOT TESHUVAH 5:1

Does the Rambam contradict himself? In the Moreh Nevuchim he says the fruit made Adam worse, and here he uses the same verse to prove we have free will. No. Here he is describing what people are: the only creatures who choose for themselves. In the Moreh Nevuchim he is describing what Adam lost by choosing wrong. Either way, for the Rambam, Adam could already choose before he ate. That is why God could command him.

Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin (a student of the Vilna Gaon) explains this in his book **Nefesh HaChaim**. Before the sin, Adam had full free will. But evil was outside him, like a fire is outside you: you can walk into it, but it is not part of you. That is why the snake had to come from outside to tempt him.

לֹא כִמוֹ שֶׁהוּא עֵתָה, שֶׁהַיֵּצֵר הַמִּפְתָּה אֶת הָאָדָם הוּא בְּתוֹךְ הָאָדָם עֲצָמוֹ, וּמִתְדַמֶּה לְהָאָדָם שֶׁהוּא עֲצָמוֹ הוּא הַרוּצָה וְנִמְשָׁךְ לַעֲשׂוֹת הָעוֹן, וְלֹא שֶׁאַחֵר חוּץ מִמֶּנּוּ מִפְתָּהוּ.

"Not like now, when the yetzer that tempts a person is inside him, and he feels like he himself wants to do the sin, and not that someone outside is tempting him."

NEFESH HACHAIM 1:6, NOTE

He says this explains the name of the tree. *Da'at* (knowledge) can mean "connecting," as in "Adam knew Chava." The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is the tree that mixed good and evil together inside people. Rav Dessler explains what this means for us: today the yetzer hara speaks to us in the first person, "I want," while the good side speaks to us as "you must." For Adam before the sin it was the other way around. The good was his own "I," and the snake had to talk to him as "you."

MIDRASH TANCHUMA

Was the sin part of God's plan?

Several sources say God prepared for the sin before Adam was even created. Adam was still responsible for what he did.

A Midrash (Tanchuma, Vayeshev 4) says that the angel of death was created on the very first day of creation, before Adam existed. When Adam sinned on the sixth day, he became the reason death came into the world. But death was already there, waiting.

The Midrash gives a parable. A man has decided to divorce his wife. He writes the *get* (divorce document), comes home holding it, and asks her for a drink. She hands him a lukewarm cup, and he says: "That's it, here is your get."

אָמַרָה לוֹ: כָּבֹד הָיִיתָ יוֹדֵעַ שְׁאֲנִי עֲתִידָה לְמִזֵּג לְךָ כּוֹס פְּשׁוּר, שְׁכַתְבֶּתָּ הַגֵּט וְהִבֵּאתוּ בְיָדֶךָ!

She said to him: "You already knew I would pour you a lukewarm cup. You came in with the get already written!"

MIDRASH TANCHUMA, VAYESHEV 4

Adam makes the same complaint to God: the Torah existed before the world was created, and it already had a law about "a person who dies in a tent" (Bamidbar 19:14). If You had not planned for death, You would not have written that law.

The Midrash is really about Yosef. Yosef's brothers chose to sell him, and they were guilty for it. But God used that sale to bring Yaakov's family down to Egypt, as He had told Avraham would happen. The point: people make real choices and are responsible for them, and God can still use those choices for His plan. As Yosef tells his brothers, *"You meant it for bad; God meant it for good"* (Bereishit 50:20).

Other sources say similar things:

Death and the yetzer hara are called "very good." At the end of creation, God calls the world טוב מאד, "very good" (Bereishit 1:31). The Midrash says that in Rabbi Meir's Torah scroll it said טוב מות, "death is good" (Bereishit Rabbah 9:5). Another opinion says "very good" means the *yetzer hara*, because without it, nobody would build a house, get married, have kids or run a business (Bereishit Rabbah 9:7).

Teshuvah was created before the world. The Gemara lists seven things God created before the world, and teshuvah is second on the list, right after Torah (Pesachim 54a). God made a way to fix mistakes before anyone made one.

Some sins happened so we would learn how to do teshuvah. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai says that King David was not the type to sin with Bat Sheva, and the Jewish people were not the type to make the Golden Calf. So why did it happen? To teach that an individual who sins can do teshuvah like David, and a whole community that sins can do teshuvah like the Jewish people did (Avodah Zarah 4b-5a).

Avraham was kept ready to fix things. The Midrash says Avraham deserved to be created first. God created Adam first instead, so that if Adam ruined things, Avraham could come later and fix them (Bereishit Rabbah 14:6).

Why does evil exist at all? The Ramchal (Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto) answers that evil exists so that, in the end, everyone will see it has no real power. God lets evil do all it can, and then shows that He alone is in charge by turning it into good (Da'at Tevunot 166). The Zohar says: וְלִית טוֹב אֶלָּא הָחוּא׃ וְדִנְפֵּק מִגּוֹ בִּישָׁא, there is no good like the good that comes out of bad (Zohar II:184a).

Did Adam mean well?

Some say Adam ate the fruit because he wanted to serve God better.
Here is who says it, and the commentator who says that was exactly
the snake's trick.

The best-known version is from **Rav Eliyahu Dessler** (1892-1953), in his book **Michtav Me'Eliyahu**. Before the sin, Adam had no evil inside him. Everything in Gan Eden helped him do good; the Gemara says angels even served him (Sanhedrin 59b). So Adam felt that his own effort was very small compared to all the help he was getting. Then he had a thought:

כמה היה מתרבה כבוד שמים... אם היה הוא, האדם, מתקרב מעט לצד ידיעת טוב ורע... וגם שם, במצב הקשה, היה מצליח... להדבק לקדושה בבחירתו החפשית, והיה הופך החושך לאור!?

"How much more honor God would get... if he, the human, came a little closer to knowing good and evil... and even there, in that hard situation, still held on to holiness by his own free choice, and turned the darkness into light!"

MICHTAV ME'ELIYAHU, VOL. 2, P. 137 AND ON

Rav Dessler even uses the phrase *yerida l'tzorech aliyah* ("going down in order to go up") for this. He says Adam had two paths in front of him, and both were for the sake of Heaven: to rise even higher in Gan Eden, or *לְשׂאוֹף לְיִרְדָּה לְצִרְהָ עֲלֶיהָ*, to go down into darkness so that more of God would be revealed from inside it. He adds that the idea that Adam sinned *lishmah*, for the sake of Heaven, comes from the Arizal (vol. 2, p. 123).

So what went wrong? Rav Dessler gives three reasons:

- 1. He misjudged evil.** Adam had never felt evil, so he could not imagine how dark it really is. He thought it would be only a little dark.
- 2. He put his own reasoning above God's command.** He thought the command could be set aside, just this once, as an *aveirah lishmah* (a sin for the sake of Heaven).
- 3. Underneath, a tiny bit of ego.** The second path came with *צֶלְ צֶלָה שֶׁל אֲנִכְיוּת*, the faintest shadow of self-interest: Adam felt that this way, his own part in revealing God would be bigger. Even Adam did not notice it.

היתה זו עבירה בלבוש מצוה, ופיתוי, ולא כמחשבתו מצוה רמה בלבוש של עבירה.

"It was a sin dressed up as a mitzvah, a temptation, and not, as he thought, a great mitzvah dressed up as a sin."

MICHTAV ME'ELIYAHU, VOL. 2, P. 137 AND ON

Others go even further. Rabbi David Shlomo Eibschutz writes in his book **Arvei Nachal**:

הקב"ה ברא לאדם הראשון באמת כולו טוב, והיה צריך שאדם הראשון יעשה עבירה כדי לערב טוב ברע, וישראלים אדם הראשון כוונת הבריאה.

"God created Adam completely good. It was necessary for Adam to sin, so that good and evil would be mixed together, and so Adam would complete the purpose of creation."

ARVEI NACHAL, BEREISHIT, DERUSH 6

His reasoning: for people to have real choices, good and evil have to be mixed together, and God does not do that mixing Himself. Rabbi Chaim of Czerowitz (**Be'er Mayim Chaim**) says the tree itself was holy, and that if Adam had waited, eating from it would have been a mitzvah. The Radbaz (Rabbi David ibn Zimra) says simply: אדם הראשון לטובה נתכוון (Adam meant well; he wanted to be like one of God's angels (Responsa 1:256)).

But the **Meshech Chochmah** (Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk) warns about this whole way of thinking. He says the snake's main argument to Chava was not "this will taste good." It was a religious argument: God doesn't really want you to hold back. He secretly wants you to eat, beat the evil, and come closer to Him. He forbade it on pain of death so you would show how much you are willing to give up for Him.

וזה על דרך עבירה לשמה, והוא באמת חפץ השם האמיתי... וזה שאמר הבורא אליו "אשר צויתך לבלתי אכל ממנו", שזה הוא חפצי האמיתי ושלימות רצוני, לא כאשר הערימך הנחש.

"This is like a sin for the sake of Heaven, and [the snake claimed] it is what God really wants... That is why God said to Adam, 'the tree I commanded you not to eat from': that is what I really want, not what the snake tricked you into thinking."

MESHECH CHOCHMAH, BEREISHIT 3:4-5

This is an important lesson. The most dangerous temptation is not "forget about God." It is "God secretly wants you to break this rule." God's answer is simple: when I tell you something, I mean it.

Many other sources give a simpler answer: Adam did not wait. According to these sources, the fruit was not forbidden forever. It was meant for later.

The Midrash criticizes Adam for not being able to wait even one hour, while his descendants wait three whole years before eating fruit from a new tree (the mitzvah of *orlah*; Bereishit Rabbah 21:7). Rabbi Yaakov of Izhbitz (the Izhbitzer's son, in his book Beit Yaakov) explains that forbidden foods are like fruit that is not ripe yet: הָיָה מְתֵר לוֹ לֶאֱכֹל, if Adam had waited, he would have been allowed to eat it.

The **Sefat Emet** says the tree was definitely created to be eaten, but Adam ate it too early. It was meant for people who had received the Torah (Purim 5654). **Rav Kook** says the same: the Tree of Knowledge is meant for people too, but only after they have passed many tests and grown (Shemonah

Kevatzim 2:316). And the **Shem MiShmuel** (Rabbi Shmuel Bornsztain of Sochatchov) asks how someone as great as Adam could listen to the snake at all. His answer: **מְהִירוֹת וּבִלְתִּי יָשׁוּב הִדְעַת**, he rushed and did not stop to think (Bereishit 5681).

The **Arizal** (Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, the great kabbalist) also says that Adam acted too soon. (He is speaking about Adam and Chava's marriage, which he sees as the deeper meaning of eating the fruit.) If Adam had waited until Shabbat, **אִזּוּ הָיָה כָּל הָעוֹלָמוֹת כְּתִקּוּנָן**, the whole world would have been fixed (Pri Etz Chaim, Rosh Hashanah 5). The **Ohr HaChaim** (Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar) quotes Chazal that if Adam had waited until Friday night, he would have made Kiddush on the wine from that tree. That proves it was never forbidden forever (Ohr HaChaim on Bereishit 1:29). The **Ben Ish Chai** (Rabbi Yosef Chaim of Baghdad) says this is one reason we start Shabbat with wine, challah and candles: to fix the sin of the tree, which happened right before the first Shabbat (Ben Ish Chai, Halachot, Year 2, Bereishit).

This may be the strongest form of the "fall up" idea: what Adam wanted was good. Grabbing it too early was the sin.

MEI HASHILOACH · TZIDKAT HATZADDIK

The Izhbitzer and Rabbi Tzadok: even the sin was God's will

Two chassidic rebbes, the Izhbitzer Rebbe and his student Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin, go the furthest. They also set clear limits on their idea.

The Izhbitzer Rebbe (in his book **Mei HaShiloach**) points out something surprising. Right after the sin and the punishment, Adam names his wife Chava, "because she was the mother of all life" (Bereishit 3:20). Why give her a name of honor right after she led him to sin? He explains that by then Adam had done teshuvah, and he now understood something new:

שְׁהַכִּיר אַחֲרֵי תְּשׁוּבָתוֹ שְׂאִין הָאָדָם יָכוֹל לַפְעוֹל כְּלוּם בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה, רַק הַכֹּל הוּא מֵהַשִּׁי"ת, וּמִמֵּילָא גַם חָטְאוֹ הָיָה בְּרִצּוֹן הַשִּׁי"ת, רַק שֶׁהָיָה לְמַעַלְה מִדַּעְתּוֹ.

"After his teshuvah, he realized that a person cannot do anything in this world on his own; everything comes from God. So even his sin was part of God's will, in a way he could not understand."

MEI HASHILOACH, VOL. II, BEREISHIT

He explains being sent out of Gan Eden the same way. If Adam had stayed in Gan Eden, he could have done complete teshuvah and fixed the sin right away. God wanted the fixing to take time, so that every generation after Adam would have a part in it and could earn its own good deeds. In his words, **כִּדְי שְׁהַטּוּבָה**, **יִהְיֶה נִקְרָא עַל שֵׁם יִגִּיעַ כִּפּוּיוֹ**, so that people would earn the good through their own work.

He also says that in the future, God will show that Adam ate only the good part of the tree, and that the sin was only a sin from Adam's point of view. He compares it to **קְלִיפּוֹת הַשּׁוּם**, the thin peel of a garlic: a very small thing (Mei HaShiloach vol. I, Bereishit).

Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen applies this to anyone who does teshuvah. The Gemara says that when a person does teshuvah out of love, even his deliberate sins turn into merits (Yoma 86b). Rabbi Tzadok explains how: after full teshuvah, a person comes to see that even his sins were part of God's will (Tzidkat HaTzaddik 40). He bases this on the Arizal's explanation of how God's knowledge and our free will fit together. Both are true. From our side, we really choose. From God's side, nothing happens outside His will.

Rabbi Tzadok also writes about Adam himself. Right after a sin that brought death to every generation, Adam experienced the light of Shabbat. That, he says, is how the world works: **בְּרִישָׁא חֲשׁוּכָא וְהוּרָא**, first darkness and then light. It is the level of a *ba'al teshuvah*, which the Gemara says is even higher than someone who never sinned (Peri Tzadik, Kedushat HaShabbat 5; Berachot 34b).

Their limits. These rebbes always say this with clear limits. Quoting them without the limits is quoting them wrong.

Only after teshuvah. Adam understood this only "after his teshuvah." Rabbi Tzadok says sins turn into merits only after complete teshuvah (Tzidkat HaTzaddik 40, 100).

At the time, it was a real sin. When Adam chose, it was a sin, and he was responsible for it.

You can't use it as an excuse. Rabbi Tzadok warns that a person can never say about himself, "my sin was God's will, so it wasn't really a sin." **הָאָדָם עֲצָמוֹ אֵינוֹ יָכוֹל לְהַעֲיד עַל עֲצָמוֹ**, a person cannot testify about himself. He says that was the mistake of Zimri, who sinned publicly in the desert (Tzidkat HaTzaddik 43).

Not yet. Rabbi Tzadok himself says that Adam's sin has not yet turned into a merit. That will only happen in the future (Peri Tzadik, Shabbat Shuvah).

SEFAT EMET · GER

The Sefat Emet: why we have free choice

The Ger Rebbe (Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter, author of the Sefat Emet) does not say Adam sinned on purpose. But he explains what the sin cost us, and why Adam was sent out.

1. What the snake offered. The snake told Chava, "you will be like God." Rashi explains God's words "man has become like one of Us" this way: now man is alone in the lower world, the way God is alone above. Onkelos and the Rambam see this as a good thing: our free will. The Sefat Emet says it was the sin itself. The snake offered Adam the chance to be independent, not needing God. But a person can only become complete by making room for God, not by doing it all on his own.

וזה הי' חטא אדה"ר בעטיו של נחש, שאמר לה "והייתם כאלקים", להיות יחיד בתחתונים.

"This was Adam's sin, caused by the snake, who told her 'you will be like God': to be on his own, independent, in this world."

SEFAT EMET, BEREISHIT 5657

2. Why we have free choice. There is a well-known teaching that God gave us free choice so we can earn what we get. If someone gets everything for free, he feels embarrassed, like a person eating someone else's food. The Sefat Emet asks: before the sin, there was no evil in the world. So how was Adam supposed to earn anything? His answer:

דבאמת יצירה אמתיות שהי' קודם החטא הי' בדביקות האחדות ממש, ולא הי' שייך "אכיל דלאו דילי' בהית"...
רק אחר הפירוד הי' הבושת, כמש"כ "ויתחבא", לכן הי' העצה ע"י הבחירה.

"Before the sin, Adam was fully connected to God, so being embarrassed about getting something for free did not apply... Only after he became separated from God did the embarrassment start, as it says, 'and he hid.' So the solution was free choice."

SEFAT EMET, BEREISHIT 5650

In other words: in Gan Eden, Adam was so close to God that nothing felt like it "wasn't his." He had no need to earn anything. The struggle of choosing between good and bad belongs to a world where we are distant from God. Free choice is not the prize Adam won by sinning. It is the way back from the distance the sin created.

3. Being sent out was also a mission. The Torah says God "sent him out of Gan Eden to work the ground" (Bereishit 3:23). The Hebrew word וַיִּשְׁלַחְהוּ can also mean "He sent him on a mission."

ופי' "וישלח" הוא שליחות ג"כ, שהקב"ה שלח את האדם לתקן את העולמות השפלים, ובכח התקשרות שהי' לו מקודם בג"ע, בכח זה יתקן גם כל העולם.

"'He sent him' also means a mission: God sent man to fix the lower world. Using the connection he had before in Gan Eden, he will fix the whole world."

SEFAT EMET, BEREISHIT 5644

He adds that this is true for every person. Before a soul comes into this world, it is shown Gan Eden and the Torah. Each of us is sent here on a mission, like Adam was.

4. Someone can rise higher than Adam was. The Sefat Emet says that in Gan Eden, Adam was like a *son* of God. After the sin, he became like a *servant*, working the ground. Then Avraham, whom God calls "My servant," rose from servant back to son, and became even greater than Adam. At Har Sinai, the whole Jewish people became God's children again (Bereishit 5661). As the Midrash says, Avraham was the one meant to fix what Adam broke (Bereishit Rabbah 14:6).

That is the Sefat Emet's version of "falling up." People really can rise higher than Gan Eden. But the credit goes to the work of fixing things afterward, not to the sin. He adds that every Shabbat we get a small taste of what life was like before the sin (Bereishit 5644, 5650, 5661).

FOUR VIEWS

Four ways to understand the sin

The sources are not just "for" or "against." They range from "a disaster" to "God's will."

1. A disaster: The sin was a disaster. Any good that came later came despite it.

This is the simple reading of the Torah and of many statements of Chazal. Death, being sent out of Gan Eden, and hard work are punishments. The "knowledge" Adam got made him worse, not better.

Rav, Sanhedrin 38b. אָדָם הָרָאשׁוֹן מִיּוֹן הָיָה... אֵיכָּה, אֵן נָטָה לְפָדָה Adam leaned toward heresy. "Where are you?" means "Where did your heart turn?"

Rambam, Moreh Nevuchim 1:2. נֶעֱנַשׁ בְּשׂוֹלָל הַהִשְׁגָּה הַהִיא הַשְׂכִּלִית His punishment was losing his higher understanding. He got "nice and embarrassing" instead of "true and false."

Kohelet Rabbah 7:13. תָּן דְּעִתָּךְ שֶׁלֹא תִקְלָקֵל וְתַחֲרִיב אֶת עוֹלָמִי God told Adam: be careful not to ruin My world, because if you ruin it, no one will fix it after you.

Ohr HaChaim, Bereishit 3:22. וְתִהְיֶה דְעִתּוֹ מְחֻלָּטָה בְּבַחֲיִנַת הַטּוֹב The whole point of the command was for Adam to know only good, and never know evil at all.

Rav Kook, LeNevuchei HaDor 5. אָבֵל כַּמָּה רַעוּת יִסְבּוֹל מִזֶּה בְּאֵין חֶקֶר, מִה שֶׁלֹא הָיָה צְרִיךְ לָזֶה Since the sin, people learn by suffering through the results of evil. That suffering was never necessary. Adam could have known only good.

2. Part of the plan: The sin was real, and God planned for it ahead of time.

Adam chose to sin and was responsible. But God built the world ready for it, and good came out of it in the end.

Midrash Tanchuma, Vayeshev 4. נִוְרָא עֲלִילָה עַל בְּנֵי אָדָם The angel of death was created before Adam. Like the sale of Yosef, which brought the family down to Egypt, a real sin was used for God's plan.

Bereishit Rabbah 9:5, 9:7. וְהָיָה טוֹב מְאֹד, זֶה יֵצֵר רָע God called death and the yetzer hara "very good" on the sixth day, before anyone sinned.

Bereishit Rabbah 14:6. שָׂאֵם יִקְלָקֵל יְבוֹא אַבְרָהָם וְיִתְקַן תַּחֲתָיו God created Adam before Avraham so that if Adam ruined things, Avraham could come and fix them.

Sefat Emet, Bereishit 5644. וְיִשְׁלַחְהוּ הוּא שְׁלִיחוֹת ג' "He sent him out" also means "He sent him on a mission": to fix the world, using his connection from Gan Eden.

Pesachim 54a. שְׁבָעָה דְּבָרִים נִבְרְאוּ קֹדָם שֶׁנִּבְרָא הָעוֹלָם... תּוֹרָה וְתִשְׁבּוּבָה Teshuvah was created before the world. God made a way to fix mistakes before anyone made one.

Ramban, Bereishit 2:9. וְזוֹ מִדָּה אֱלֹהִית מִצַּד אֶחָד וְרָעָה לְאֶחָד Being able to choose is a Godly trait in one way, and bad for people in another.

Seforno, Bereishit 3:22. הַנָּה יְרֵדוּף כָּל הַיָּמִים אַחֲרֵי הָעֵרֶב Even death protects us. If people lived forever in this state, they would chase pleasure forever and never reach what they were created for.

Ramchal, Da'at Tevunot 166. שְׂצָרִיךְ לַגְלוּת הָרַע וּלְהַנִּיחוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת כָּל מַה שֶּׁבְּחֻקּוֹ, לַהֲרָאוֹת אַחֲרֵי כֵךְ יִחוּד שְׁלִיטָתוֹ. God lets evil do everything it can, and then shows that He alone is in charge by turning it into good.

Zohar II:184a. וְלִית טוֹב אֵלָּא הֵוא דְּנִפְק מִגּוֹ בִּישָׁא There is no good like the good that comes out of bad.

Kedushat Levi, Bereishit. וְכִאֲשֶׁר נִתְעַלּוּ לְמַעַלְהָ נְתוּסָף אֲוָרָם כִּי־תִרְוֶן הָאוֹר מִתּוֹךְ הַחֹשֶׁךְ. Because of the sin, holy sparks fell into the physical world. When tzaddikim raise them through Torah and mitzvot, they shine even brighter than before, like a son who left home and came back.

3. Good goal, too soon: Adam wanted something good, but he took it too early.

According to these sources, the fruit was meant for people eventually. The sin was not waiting: rushing, not thinking it through, or trying to serve God in his own way instead of God's.

Rav Dessler, Michtav Me'Eliyahu vol. 2, p. 137. הִיתָה זֶה עֲבִירָה בִּלְבוּשׁ מִצְוָה... וְלֹא כִּמְחֻשְׁבָּתוֹ מִצְוָה רַמָּה בִּלְבוּשׁ שֶׁל Adam wanted to go down into darkness and beat it there, to bring God more honor. But he misjudged how strong evil is, put his own reasoning above God's command, and had a tiny trace of ego. It was a sin dressed up as a mitzvah.

Radbaz (Rabbi David ibn Zimra), Responsa 1:256. אָדָם הָרָאשׁוֹן לְטוֹבָה נִתְכוּוֹן. Adam meant well. He wanted to be like one of God's angels.

Ohr HaChaim, Bereishit 1:29. וְשֵׁאֵם הָיָה מִמֶּתִּין עַד עֶרֶב שַׁבָּת הָיָה מְקַדֵּשׁ עַל הַיַּיִן If Adam had waited until Shabbat, he would have made Kiddush on wine from that tree. It was never forbidden forever.

Beit Yaakov (Izhbitz), Bereishit 36. וְאִם הָיָה מִמֶּתִּין אָדָם הָרָאשׁוֹן הָיָה מִתֵּר לּוֹ לֶאֱכֹל. Forbidden foods are like fruit that is not ripe yet. If Adam had waited, he would have been allowed to eat it.

Sefat Emet, Purim 5654. בּוֹדָאִי נִבְרָא גַם עֵץ הַדַּעַת לֶאֱכֹל מִמֶּנּוּ, אֲבָל אֲדָה"ר אֲכָלוּ שְׁלֹא בְּזִמְנֵהּ The tree was created to be eaten, but only by people who received the Torah. Adam ate it too early.

Rav Kook, Shemonah Kevatzim 2:316. וּמוֹכֵן הוּא לּוֹ גַם אֲכָלוּ מֵעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וְרַע, אַחֲרֵי שִׁיעֲמוּד בְּמִסּוֹת הָרַבּוֹת. The Tree of Knowledge is meant for people too, but only after they pass many tests and grow.

Shem MiShmuel, Bereishit 5681. מַחֲמַת מֵהִירוֹת וּבִלְתִּי יִשׁוּב הַדַּעַת. How could Adam listen to the snake? He rushed and did not stop to think.

Meshech Chochmah, Bereishit 3:4-5. וְזֶה עַל דֶּרֶךְ עֲבִירָה לְשִׁמָּה. A warning: "God secretly wants you to eat it, for His sake" was the snake's argument. What God really wanted was what He said.

4. God's will: From God's point of view, even the sin was part of His will.

This is the boldest view, from the Arvei Nachal and the rebbes of Izhbitz and Lublin. It is only true from God's side, it can only be seen after complete teshuvah, and it can never be used as an excuse to sin.

Arvei Nachal, Bereishit, derush 6. וְהִיא צָרִיךְ שֶׁאָדָם הָרָאשׁוֹן יַעֲשֶׂה עֲבִירָה כְּדִי לַעֲרֹב טוֹב בָּרַע. God created Adam completely good. Adam needed to sin so good and evil would be mixed, which is what makes free choice possible.

Be'er Mayim Chaim, Bereishit 3:5. וּנְמָצָא וְדָאֵי שְׁהִיָּה מוֹכֵרָה לֵאכּוֹל מֵעֵץ הַדֶּעַת. People were created to know good and evil, so eating from the tree had to happen. Only the timing was wrong; on Shabbat it would have been a mitzvah.

Mei HaShiloach, vol. II, Bereishit. אַחֲרֵי הַתְּשׁוּבָה הָיָה בְּרָצוֹן הַשֵּׁנִי, רַק שֶׁהָיָה לְמַעַלְלָה מִדֶּעִתּוֹ. After his teshuvah, Adam understood that even his sin was part of God's will, in a way he could not understand.

Mei HaShiloach, vol. I, Bereishit. וְהַחֲטָא לֹא הָיָה רַק לְפִי דִעְתּוֹ כְּקָלִיפּוֹת הַשּׁוּם. In the future, God will show that Adam ate only the good part, and that the sin was very small, like the thin peel of a garlic.

Tzidkat HaTzaddik 40. שִׁכִּיר וִיבִין שְׂכַל מַה שְּׁחָטָא הִי' ג"כ בְּרָצוֹן הַשֵּׁנִי. Complete teshuvah means understanding that your sins were also part of God's will. Then they turn into merits.

Takanat HaShavin 5. שִׁיתּוֹקֵן כָּל הַקּוֹדֵם גַּם חֲטָא אֲדָה"ר דִּיתְהַפֵּךְ הַכֹּל לזִכּוּת. When Mashiach comes, everything will be fixed, including Adam's sin, and it will all turn into merits.

Peri Tzadik, Shabbat Shuvah. הַחֲטָא הַזֶּה יִתְבַּרֵּר הַחֲטָא הַזֶּה. The limit: in our world, Adam's sin has not turned into a merit yet. That only happens in the future.

BEREISHIT RABBAH 22:13

The real "up" is teshuvah

All the sources on this page agree on one thing. If anything good came out of the sin, it came from the teshuvah afterward, not from the sin itself.

Reish Lakish says that when a person does teshuvah out of love, even his deliberate sins turn into merits (Yoma 86b). Rabbi Abahu says that a *ba'al teshuvah* stands in a place that even a completely righteous person cannot reach (Berachot 34b). The idea of "going down in order to go up" rests on these two teachings. The going up never comes from the sin. It comes from what a person does after it.

The Midrash tells a story about Adam himself. After Kayin killed Hevel and was punished, Adam met him and asked what happened at his judgment. Kayin said: "I did teshuvah, and my punishment was made lighter."

הַתְּחִיל אָדָם הָרָאשׁוֹן מְטַפֵּחַ עַל פָּנָיו, אָמַר: כִּן הָיָא כְּחָה שֶׁל תְּשׁוּבָה וְאֲנִי לֹא הָיִיתִי יוֹדֵעַ! מִיָּד עָמַד אָדָם הָרָאשׁוֹן וְאָמַר: מִזְמוֹר שִׁיר לְיוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת.

Adam started hitting his own face. He said: "This is how powerful teshuvah is, and I didn't know!" Right away, Adam stood up and said: "A song for the Shabbat day."

BEREISHIT RABBAH 22:13

Rabbi Levi adds that Adam wrote this psalm, it was forgotten, and Moshe later restored it. So when we sing *Mizmor Shir L'Yom HaShabbat* every Friday night in Kabbalat Shabbat, according to the Midrash we are singing Adam's song about discovering teshuvah.

IMPORTANT

What this does NOT mean

These are big ideas, and they are easy to misuse. Here are the limits the sources themselves set.

1

It does not mean you can sin and fix it later.

הָאוֹמֵר אֶחָטָא וְאָשׁוּב, אֶחָטָא וְאָשׁוּב, אֵין מְסַפִּיקִין בְּיָדוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת תְּשׁוּבָה. The Mishnah says that someone who plans to sin and do teshuvah afterward does not get the chance to do teshuvah (Yoma 8:9). You can only see God's plan looking back. You can't use it to plan ahead.

2

It was still a real sin.

Every source on this page, even the boldest, says Adam was responsible and was punished: death, being sent out of Gan Eden, and hard work to earn a living. Some opinions in the Gemara are much harsher than anything here (Sanhedrin 38b). And the Midrash says that when God created Adam, He showed him all the trees of Gan Eden and told him: "See how beautiful My world is. Be careful not to ruin it, because if you ruin it, there is no one to fix it after you" (Kohelet Rabbah 7:13).

3

We are not guilty for Adam's sin.

בֶּן לֹא יִשָּׂא בְעוֹן הָאָב, a child is not punished for a parent's sin (Yechezkel 18:20). Adam's sin changed the world we live in: people die, and we have a yetzer hara inside us. But nobody is born guilty because of it. The Gemara also says the spiritual damage from the snake was removed from the Jewish people at Har Sinai (Shabbat 146a).

FAQ

Common questions

Short answers, with sources.

Did Adam sin on purpose?

Yes, in the sense that God told him not to eat, and he chose to eat. The question is why. The Rambam says he followed what looked good to him. Rav Dessler says he meant to serve God, but he misjudged how strong evil is, followed his own reasoning instead of God's command, and had a tiny trace of ego. The Arvei Nachal and the Izhbitzer go further. See Four ways to understand the sin for all the views.

If Adam had no yetzer hara yet, how could he sin?

The Nefesh HaChaim (1:6) says Adam did have free will before the sin, but the pull toward evil was outside him, coming from the snake. Eating the fruit brought it inside him. The Ramban explains it differently: before the fruit, Adam naturally did what was right, and the fruit is what gave him personal desires.

Does Judaism believe in "original sin"?

Not in the sense that we are born guilty. Each person is responsible only for what he does (Yechezkel 18:20, Devarim 24:16). Adam's sin changed the world: it brought death and made it harder to do the right thing. But no one is born guilty, and every person can do teshuvah and come back to God directly.

What fruit did Adam and Chava eat? Was it an apple?

No Jewish source says it was an apple. The Gemara (Berachot 40a, Sanhedrin 70a-b) has three opinions. Rabbi Meir says grapes, because wine causes people so much trouble. Rabbi Nechemya says a fig, because they then covered themselves with fig leaves: they fixed their mistake with the same tree they sinned with. Rabbi Yehuda says wheat, because a baby does not learn to say "Abba" and "Imma" until it has eaten grain. The Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 15:7) adds an etrog.

What does "yerida l'tzorech aliyah" mean?

It means "going down in order to go up." The phrase first appears in the Gemara (Makkot 7b) in a technical halachic discussion. The Baal Shem Tov and his students used it to teach that sometimes a person falls in order to climb higher, the way Avraham went down to Egypt and came back richer.

The early chassidic sources use the phrase about a person's own ups and downs, and about exile. Rav Dessler uses it directly for Adam: he says Adam chose "לְשֹׂאוֹן לִירֵידָה לְצֹרֶךְ עֲלִיָּה," to go down in order to go up, and that this was his mistake (Michtav Me'Eliyahu vol. 2, p. 137 and on).

Why does God ask Adam "Where are you?" Doesn't He know?

God is not asking for information. The Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 19:9) reads אַיֶּכָּה ("where are you") as אֵיכָּה ("how could this happen"), the first word of Eichah. God is saying: yesterday you listened to Me, and today you listened to the snake. It is also an invitation for Adam to answer and take responsibility.

Hebrew texts from Sefaria; the Moreh Nevuchim in Ibn Tibbon's translation. English renderings and commentary are Torah Tech originals. Michtav Me'Eliyahu is quoted from the printed edition, vol. 2.

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