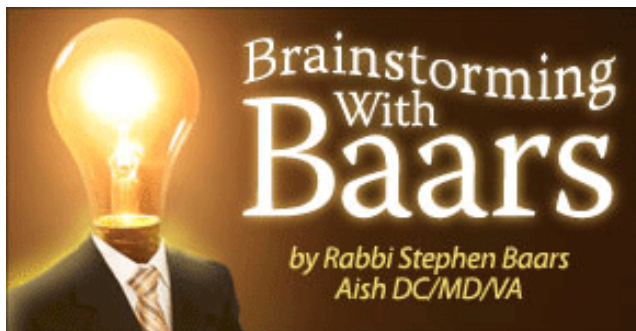


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Purpose and Meaning

"Insufficient funds."

They aren't the worst words I have ever heard but they definitely don't make my day. Wouldn't life be just great if you got more out of your bank account than you put in? I am sure all the physics majors will tell me, nothing in life works that way, that you can't get out more than you put in.

Well, that simple paradigm will explain most of life, and it definitely will help us understand the first line of the Torah.

Somewhere in Ohio:

"How does it look?" asked Jack Field, the worried owner of a new house.

Michael Kinter, the city building inspector, shook his head slowly. "Not too good, Mr. Field. I'm sorry to tell you, it looks like you bought yourself a can of worms," Kinter said, raising the corner of his mouth in a slight smirk of

enjoyment.

"What do you see? What's wrong?" A high-pitched note of panic flowed through Field's usually deep voice.

"Well, it's obvious," Kinter said, pointing to an area at the base of the house. Kinter, always one to have a little fun at someone else's expense, enjoyed dragging it out. "You see, it's lower. It's lower than the same point on the other side."

Field stared. He held his hand up to his eye in order to see the angles. He walked back and forth, looked sideways, and even turned a little upside down, hoping somehow it was really the world which was off balance and not his house. But he couldn't escape the obvious. One side of the house was indeed lower than the other.

"What does this mean?" Field asked dejectedly.

"It's got to come down. Nothing else to do about it," Kinter said in an almost off-handed manner.

"The whole house?" Field screeched.

"Yep, I'm sorry to say." The gleam in Kinter's eye betrayed his words of empathy.

"I paid good money for this house," Field protested. "How could they do this to me?"

"It's an old trick," Kinter explained. "A builder comes into town, puts up a bunch of houses using inexperienced workers, with cheap materials and improper foundations. After selling the houses, he skips town."

*"But the house looked so solidly built,"
Field said in disbelief.*

*"It's made to look that way, at least to
you," Kinter said. "But to the trained
eye, it's obviously rife with bad
planning and construction. And a house
like that is unlikely to stand for long.*

"Man Plans, God Laughs"

Rabbi Yaakov Palatnik tells me if you want to make God laugh, tell Him your plans.

Scientists claim that existence as we know it started with the Big Bang. The Big Bang basically goes like this: Once there was nothing, then there was something, then the something blew up. I'm not one to quibble, but truth be told, it wasn't really such a big bang. For one, the amount of space it took up was very small, very, very small. So I would like to suggest we call it the Small Bang.

And it wasn't such a bang either, because there was very little to no space for sound waves to travel in, so let's call it the Small Whimper. But as I said, let's not quibble, Big Bang or Small Whimper, they both beg questions.

To start, where did that first piece of tiny matter come from?

(Hmmm, Tiny Whimper ... no, it doesn't rhyme. I just can't see the people in Sweden announcing, "The Noble Prize for physics this year goes for the discovery of the Tiny Whimper." Nope, doesn't work.)

But, whatever you call it, it still fell apart - OK, went bang, whimper, poof, whatever it did. The question is, why?

Where did it come from and why did it go bang?

Mr. Scientist will tell you - I've heard it myself - that this is not their question, that this is beyond physics, beyond what they can know.

This is clearly not true.

"Whatever takes place without purpose shows, as is well known, no trace of wisdom or power." (Duties of the Heart, Vol. 1, Ch. 6 by Rabbi Bachya ben Joseph ibn Paquda, 11th-12th Century Jewish philosopher)

There are many things we can know about what happened or Who caused the Big Bang.

That "Who" must have had the intelligence to put in all that came out. Just like my bank, you can't draw a check unless the funds are there. To get a rain forest and an elephant out, Someone had to put it in. In Judaism, we call that Someone, God.

In other words, existence proves God.

But here's the cosmic joke. The claim of a primary cause, causes a primary question: Why? A belief in a first cause, as opposed to the eternity of existence (or a plurality of causes of existence), leads man to one of the greatest question in life: Why? There is not, nor can there be a "why" in an eternal world. What is, just is.

"Why" is a spiritual concept. Dogs, cats and elephants don't ask why, they just eat what's in front of them. Only a soul wants to know why.

It's funny that, in all its efforts to explain the world outside of any spirituality, science itself proves the existence of a soul: yours.

Every human being, or, I should say, every soul, who ever heard the account of the Big Bang asked "Why?" So did every human being who ever heard: *"In the beginning God created*

heaven and earth." (Genesis 1:1)

And every "why" suggests a soul.

So I will leave you with this thought, and I hope I am right. In all the bad news the news brings, I see a consistent and growing glimmer of light, that for each catastrophe mankind asks "WHY?"

And when you wake a soul it's hard to get it back to sleep.

All quotes used in this work are, unless otherwise stated, fictional.

Brainstorming Questions to Ponder

1. Take a major event and ask, "Why is this happening?"
2. Discuss it with three other people.
3. Take a major event in your personal life and ask "why?" in the same way.



Adam and Eve Eat the Apple

The story of Adam and Eve's eating of the forbidden fruit, a major topic in this week's Torah portion, is perhaps the most famous of Biblical stories. Warned by God to refrain from eating fruit from the Tree of Knowledge that is in the midst of the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve ignore the divine command. It is puzzling how they could have acted that way; before

they ate from the tree, evil was not a part of their psychological makeup – they were pure of sin, having no shame of their own nakedness. (see Genesis 2:25) While the text makes it clear that the tree was quite attractive, it is still difficult to believe that such an enticement would lead Adam and Eve to transgress. What happened that they disobeyed the Almighty?!

While the snake brought the tree to Eve's attention, and claimed that "on the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5), it is hard to imagine that this is what drove Adam and Eve to eat of the forbidden fruit. The narrative makes clear that to Eve the tree appeared "good to eat, desirable to look at, and a pleasant means to acquire wisdom" (Genesis 2:6). But there is no mention of the tree as a vehicle to become God's equal. Rather, it is a higher level of wisdom they ultimately seek.

The Madregat Adam (great 19th century rabbi) offers a widely accepted interpretation. He says that Adam and Eve never intended to revolt against God. Quite the contrary, they viewed eating the fruit as a means to elevate themselves to a higher level of service to God. Realizing that the "yetzer hara," the evil inclination, was not a part of their psychological makeup, they felt flawed in their ability to serve God in as lofty a manner as possible. Service of God is most significantly exemplified when someone faces a challenge – and acts as the Almighty would want us to act.

For Adam and Eve there were no such challenges, for they lacked the internal desire to do anything against God's will. They reasoned that eating the fruit would allow them, for the first time, to feel the internal tug of war between the "yetzer hara" and the "yetzer hatov" (the desire to do good). They reasoned that facing and overcoming such challenges would demonstrate greater loyalty to God.

What the two failed to realize, however, was that they would be generating conflicts that they may not be able to overcome. Though intended to better show their loyalty to the Almighty, these tests proved to be their downfall. According to the Madregat Adam, the sin of Adam and Eve was not in disobeying God. Rather, it was their failure to appreciate how much God really understands them.

God has the greatest understanding of human beings – who they are and what they are (and are not) capable of achieving. If God says you shouldn't eat from the fruit because it will cause problems, then the right thing to do is to listen to God! God created us and certainly He knows us best of all. When we abandon the parameters laid down by our Creator, we are opening ourselves up to unfortunate circumstances.

For thousands of years, Jews have understood the importance of hearkening to God's commands – not only because they are expressions of His will – but also because we know that following them is truly what's best for us.



Eating in the Garden

And Hashem God caused to sprout from the ground every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food; also the Tree of Life in the midst of the garden, and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad.... And Hashem God commanded Adam, saying, "Of every tree

of the garden you may freely eat; but of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, you must not eat thereof; for on the day you eat of it, you shall surely die... And the woman perceived that the tree was good for eating and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable as a means to wisdom... (Bereishis 2:9, 16-17; 3:6)

The Almighty created an absolutely gorgeous Garden filled with "every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food." Right in the center of this Garden He placed this unbelievably desirable tree called the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and He warned Adam, "Watch out! You can't eat from this tree! Yes, it looks incredibly delicious and mouthwatering, but if you eat from it, you will die."

Now, would you place an exquisite table of delectable delights in front of your children, placing the most appetizing dish of all right in the middle, and then lace that dish with poison and tell them, "Watch out for that one! Although it is extremely desirable, it will kill you." Why did Hashem bait Adam and Chava in such a seemingly cruel way and place a deadly booby trap in front of them?

Living Forever

The key to unlocking this mystery is to consider what would have happened if Adam had eaten from the Tree of Life before eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. We can derive the answer from Hashem's reaction after Adam mistakenly ate from the Tree of Knowledge first. The Torah says that Hashem drove Adam out of the garden to ensure that he would not eat from the Tree of Life and live forever. Even after Adam ate from the Tree of Knowledge and became mortal, the Tree of Life could have offset his eventual death and enabled him to live forever.

Imagine how different this story would have been if Adam had eaten from the Tree of Life

first. He would have become eternal, and immune to the danger of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Hashem was not dangling a booby trap in front of Adam, for Adam could have eaten from the delicious Tree of Knowledge, as long as he ate from the Tree of Life first. In fact, Hashem commanded him to eat from *all* the trees – including the Tree of Life – when He said, “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat.” Adam’s mistake was the order in which he ate from these two trees.

Wisdom vs. Experience

What is the Torah teaching us here? What does the Tree of Life represent, and what is represented by the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil? And lastly, what is the mistake that Adam made that we need to watch out for in our own lives?

The Tree of Life represents the Torah: “It is a Tree of Life to those who grasp it” (Proverbs 3:18). The Torah is the ultimate repository of wisdom; it teaches us how to live meaningfully in every single facet of life. It is the Almighty’s blueprint of creation, from which all existence flows. It is the defining source of ethics and morality, the instruction manual (*Toras Chaim*) on how to use this world to understand our purpose, reach our potential, and forge a meaningful connection with our Creator.

What is the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and why is it problematic? This tree represents the knowledge that comes from life experience. It is the desire to go see the world and taste all its fruits, and through the process of trial and error try to discover what is good, what is destructive, and what is the proper path in life. It is the thrill of travelling across the country with no map or destination, open to whatever comes your way.

But growing from the method of experience entails running into obstacles, falling down,

and getting bruised along the way. Mistakes will certainly happen, sometimes serious ones, but we hope we will eventually figure things out. This is the underlying attitude of the person who chooses to learn about life from the school of hard knocks instead of first learning Torah.

Experience without Torah is enticing, like the fruit on the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, but ultimately it is a death trap. Diving into the vast, alluring arena of life blindfolded inevitably leaves a path of destruction in its wake – broken hearts and homes, shattered dreams, cynicism, confusion, and alienation.

Potential *baalei teshuvah* experience a burning conflict when wrestling with the decision to drop what they are doing – whether it is travelling across Europe and the Middle East or enjoying themselves in college – and come to yeshiva to learn Torah. Essentially, they are choosing between the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life.

The Torah is teaching us a crucial life lesson: before indulging in the myriad experiences, we must first learn Torah, life’s instruction manual, to understand the ethical principles that govern existence and the proper parameters for engaging in this world. Once these definitions and concepts are clear, we can eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, because we already know how to use the world as a vehicle to connect to Hashem and reach our potential.

Experience life! We are not meant to live in an ivory tower. But we must first gain the necessary wisdom on how to live life so that we can avoid the pitfalls and not get destroyed in the process.

For example, everyone wants to get married, and no one plans on getting divorced, but the fact is that just over 50% of all marriages will end in divorce. Don't wing it. Learn Torah's wisdom on marriage and then get married.

Hashem wants us to get the most out of life. And to do that you've got to know what you are living for. Ask a student: Why are you going to college? I've got to get a degree. Why do you need a degree? I've got to get a job. Why do you need a job? I've got to make money. Why do you need money? I've got to buy food. Why do you need food? I've got to eat. Why do you need to eat? I've got to live. Why do you need to live? I've got to go to college...

You need to know the answer to life's most important question: what are you living for? The answer is in the Torah. First eat from the Tree of Life. Then apply your learning and experience the breathtaking beauty and meaning life has to offer.



What Did Cain Say?

In the story of Cain and Abel, we see the first ever act of wanton violence. It didn't take us long and, unfortunately, it was just a taste of things to come.

Let's recap for a moment: God accepts Abel's sacrifice, but not Cain's (because Cain brought second rate goods whereas Abel brought the best). Cain is upset and angry. God questions his reaction, telling him that good and evil are completely his to choose. There is no need to be upset, merely to choose. The fact that he has made a mistake has not made him a bad person. He still has the same ability to choose good as he had before he made his mistake.

All well and good, but then comes a very strange sentence: "...Cain said to his brother Abel and then, when they were in the field, he rose up and killed him..."

The Sages point out that surely there are some missing words here. The verb "said" has no object. What exactly did Cain say? And why would the Torah say he said something if it's not going to tell us what he said?!

The Sages explain: What Cain said is irrelevant. What is relevant is that he said. Cain was picking a fight. He could have said anything; it wouldn't really have mattered. He was looking for an excuse to blame someone else for his own failures and shortcomings.

Is this not the root of so much strife and argument in our own lives? We are dissatisfied with our situation, and rather than look inside to find the fault and its solution, it is far easier to shift the blame to someone else. Very often those "someone elses" are the people we love the most.

The Sages tell us that when we are upset and frustrated with anyone, but especially those we love, the first question we must ask ourselves, and answer with all honesty is this: Is it their problem or mine? Much of the time, the problem is our own. We need to be brave and honest enough to recognize that. For as long as we seek to blame others for our own frustrations and shortcomings, we will never change.