

WAS ADAM'S ACTION "DISOBEDIENCE"? (ITS COROLLARY – RESPONSIBLE FREEDOM)

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The question of whether or not Adam's action in the Garden of Eden was disobedience presents a fundamental problem. It is the origin of three different views: (1) the Judaic, (2) the Christian, and (3) one suggested by the writer. In Judaism, his action is "disobedience," but restricted to Adam as an individual. In traditional Christianity (Catholicism), it is also accepted as "disobedience," but with a more wide-ranging interpretation. In the writer's view, no "disobedience" occurred, and this leads to a positive view of Adam's action.

Augustine (354-430 C.E.) advanced the Christian view that Adam's action corrupted man and all nature as a result of which mankind, as Adam's progeny, inherited the stain of disobedience (sin). The Puritans had a rhyme, "In Adam's Fall, We sinned all." In this view, every human being is born with this stain that marks him as a permanent sinner, even though the word "sin" is not mentioned in the biblical narrative. Man thus cannot choose not to be a sinner. Can an action of free will be inherited? If it is inherited, then free will is meaningless. The Christian view deprives man of the capacity for free will. Many Christian fathers believed that the theory of Original Sin repudiated the twin foundations of the Christian faith: the goodness of God's Creation and the freedom of the human will.

The view of inherited disobedience raises several issues. Why would God condemn all of mankind because of one man's transgression? How could the act of one man corrupt the whole of nature, in spite of God's stating that His creation was "*very good*" (Gen. 1:31)? Also, why does man, created in the "image of God," act contrary to this relationship in his first encounter with God? The thesis of disobedience is contradicted by several quotations from the Torah:

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Yet, Thou has made him but a little lower than the angels, And hast crowned him with glory and honor. Thou hast made him to have dominion over the works of Thy hand . . . (Ps. 8:6-7).

The Heavens belong to the Lord, But the earth He gave over to man (Ps. 115:16).

Adam's action did not encroach upon our individual freedom; every person is free to choose good or evil.

The third view is the result of a careful, thorough and logical analysis of the Adam narrative. It restricts itself to the text without any references to outside or midrashic sources. It argues that the narrative is not about disobedience at all, but introduces a positive aspect of man, that of morality. Inconsistencies in the "test" seem to have been introduced deliberately to enable man to scrutinize carefully the challenge in order to arrive at a logical exegesis of its purpose and meaning. There is no valid reason for introducing the "test" other than to introduce a sense of morality through man's autonomous choice. Edification of man also plays a role, as is true for other narratives in Genesis, of Cain and Abel and the encounters between God and Abraham.

Adam is created in the "image" of God. This has two meanings. One is that man is God's representative on earth and, therefore, justifies the charge to be its master and rule it (Gen. 1:28). The other is that the "image" also represents reason, intellect, creativity and free will. The validity of this statement is that these attributes reflect the crucial difference between man and beast. These human faculties had to come into play when God presented Adam with a command which called for a choice between Yes and No.

God commands Adam: *. . . but for the tree of knowledge of good and evil, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die' (2:17)*. God's mention of "knowledge of good and evil" and of "death" indicates that they are built into the fabric of the universe. They are mentioned before Adam makes his choice, and therefore are not the result of his action. God's challenge to Adam, especially in view of the promised penalty, is perplexing. By disobeying God who created him, he contravened the quality of his creation: *And God saw all that He had made and found it very good (1:31)*.

What was God's intent in the challenge to Adam? It must have had a positive purpose, not simply a question of obedience. The existence of the tree of knowledge of good and evil is the best indication of God's intent. Why put

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this tree in the garden if He did not want man to know the difference between good and evil, and be guided by that knowledge? It defies logic to believe that God would not want man to rise above the non-moral level of animals, especially since that rise becomes the basis for theism and leads man closer to God.

Man was to acquire the moral dimension by his autonomous decision and thus be responsible for the moral, human condition. The correctness of Adam's decision is confirmed by God who says, after Adam eats the fruit of the tree: "*Now that the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil . . .* (3:22). This shows Adam's action was a positive one, not one of disobedience.

To continue the passage: *What if he should stretch out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat and live forever? So the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden* (3:23). This is a clear statement of the reason for the banishment; it was not because of disobedience. One other statement by God: '*Be fertile and increase*' (1:28) contravenes the promised penalty of immediate personal death, that was meant only as a threat and not a punishment. But man did become mortal, which is in consonance with a physical composition subject to eventual decay and demise.

One lesson from Adam's "test" is that man is free to choose. In choosing the knowledge of good and evil, he added a new dimension to freedom; one that imposes restraints on itself for the sake of true freedom as opposed to absolute freedom. Without restraint, man is free to be evil; with it, he is not. Without it, he is free to master others. With it, he is free to master himself. After Adam's choice, man's freedom acquired a self-imposed responsible element, which is a necessary condition for his ethical relationship with God.

Choice is the central religious issue for man, because the meaning of a man's life is determined by his choices. (A non-choice is also a choice, that of indifference.) Man always chooses what his qualitative life will be, what he will become. Through the process of choice, man is self-determining. If he opts for partnership with God, man adds his share toward the redemption of the world: *Tikkun Olam*. In so doing, he gives meaning and purpose to his life. Man's choices cannot be made in a vacuum graced only by his own presence. Always there is the presence of God, who challenges man to approach the choice in the spirit of responsible freedom.