

## **Forbidden Fruits' Creative Juice: Bereshit 5787**

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In 1940, hidden in the Hotel Ermitage on the French Riviera, a young German woman began a frenzied journey to paint over 1,300 autobiographical images. Her impetus was not only the political storm over Europe, but an attempt to deal with the pain of a family afflicted by mental illness. She held an existential fear that, if she did not paint, she might also succumb to the dark depths of depression. Charlotte Salomon entrusted her epic body of work called *Life? or Theatre?* to her doctor, which is how it survived. She, however, was murdered at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

In the same year, Mexican Artist Frida Kahlo experienced the joy of remarrying her beloved, if troublesome, Diego Rivera. Her back catalogue was already full of self-portraits painted from her sickbed after an horrific bus crash. After the ring was back on her finger, she continued a life-long practice of channelling her physical pain, weak health, and the anguish caused by the mercurial and philandering Rivera into her work.

In *Bereshit* we encounter the first human experience of these kinds of pain. In Genesis 1:27, we first read that humanity was created “in the image of God.” Once they eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge, humans are condemned to know hardship, pain and toil. Seeing that the fruit had been ingested, God comments that “humankind has become like any of us, knowing good and bad.” (Genesis 3:22.)

If humans had been already created in the image of God, how is it that God witnessed them become like the Divine afterwards? Moreover, why would eating the banned fruit make them Godlike?

An unnamed questioner once put this contradiction to the Iberian Jewish philosopher Maimonides (c. 1135–1204). The latter was asked if it was not “strange that the punishment for rebelliousness should be the means of elevating man to a pinnacle of perfection to which he had not attained previously.” In his *Guide for the Perplexed* (written 1185–1190), Maimonides ticks the questioner off for studying the matter superficially yet thinking that he could understand the Torah. Shaking off his exasperation, Maimonides explains: before his disobedience, humanity had God’s intellect and thus could distinguish truth from falsehood. Knowledge of good and evil constitutes an alternative, moral, sense of understanding, one stemming from desires rooted in imagination and bodily appetites. Maimonides viewed that distinction between good and evil as a lesser form of knowledge to which humanity fell. (*Guide to the Perplexed* I:2, translation from Michael Friedländer.) The Spanish-born Nachmanides (1194–1270) offers an alternative answer in his Torah commentary on Genesis 3:22. This receipt of choice—between good and bad—elevated Adam, for deciding between the good and the bad and acting at will are Divine-like qualities. Perhaps this explains why the tree was in the garden in the first place: maybe God wanted humans to acquire this gift.

Either way, as soon as the fruit is eaten and the knowledge gained, human beings perform their first creative act: they make clothes to cover the shame they now feel. Creativity is therefore inextricably linked with distress, and so is the freedom to create. If we do understand the knowledge of good and bad as a punishment, then the

sentence is tempered by another gift: the capacity to choose creative succour.

There is now a credible body of secular psychological and neuroscientific evidence showing the benefits of creativity for wellbeing. One need not become a world-famous artist; it is enough to bake a tray of squidgy brownies, cable-stitch a warm jumper, or plant poppies in a small garden. The Jewish Studio Project, founded by Rabbi Adina Allen, builds on her mother Pat Allen's work in art therapy and combines it with Torah study. Naturally, their programs have empowered different creative types to cultivate resilience, well-being, and spiritual vitality.

Creativity alone though cannot solve everything. Saloman died. Kahlo continued to live in pain. At a time when a family member faced a then-terminal diagnosis, I asked a wise rabbi why we prayed for a *refu'ah shelemah* (רְפוּאָה שְׁלֵמָה)—“a complete healing”—when we know that prayer does not always save life. He told me that healing does not refer only to “healing of the body” (*refu'at hagguf*, רְפוּאָת הַגּוּף) but also to “healing of the soul” (*refu'at hannefesh*, רְפוּאָת הַנֶּפֶשׁ). In some situations, we pragmatically pray to escape the mental anguish of illness and to feel peace. Salomon and Kahlo both knew that the ‘flow state’—the deep focus of creativity—can be a most effective way to exit crushing thoughts and receive such relief.

That is divine.

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