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PARSHAS BEREISHIS • OCTOBER 9, 2026 • 28 TISHREI 5787

The Zera Emes Project by Rabbi Moshe Hubner was created to honor and share the Torah of over 250 Gedolim who weren't zocheh to descendants of their own. Their legacy lives on through their words of Torah and emunah that continue to inspire and touch countless lives. By bringing their timeless divrei Torah and wisdom to life, we create a powerful connection to the past to help inspire today's generation.

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The Choice to Disobey

The Midrash Rabbah (*Bereishis* 10:6) teaches that every blade of grass has an angel appointed over it, instructing it to grow. We can assume that included in this instruction is its accuracy: the grass is told to produce the particular species that was planted. There is no possibility that one species will be planted and another will emerge. The angel/earth carries out its mission exactly as it was commanded.

This is one of the fundamental differences between an angel and a human being. An angel has no choice. Its role is to carry out the will of Hashem exactly as it was given.

But this raises a fascinating question. The Torah tells us that on the third day of Creation, Hashem commanded, "Let the earth sprout vegetation: seed-bearing plants, fruit trees (עץ פרי) of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it" (*Bereishis* 1:11).

Rashi, quoting Chazal, explains that when Hashem said עץ פרי—"fruit trees"—the command was that the tree itself should taste like its fruit. The bark should have the same taste as the fruit it would eventually produce.

But that is not what happened. The following *passuk* says, "And the earth brought forth a tree yielding fruit" (עץ עושה פרי). The earth produced trees that bore

fruit—but the trees themselves did not taste like the fruit.

HOW?

If the angel appointed over creation has no choice but to carry out precisely what Hashem commands, how could the earth have deviated from the command? How could it have produced a tree whose bark did not taste like its fruit?

Rav Motel Pogromansky adds another dimension to the question. Rashi explains that the earth was punished for failing to follow Hashem's command. Later, when Adam sinned and was cursed, the earth was also punished for its own sin (*Midrash Rabbah* 5:9).

But this seems difficult. If the earth—and the ministering angel responsible for it—has no yetzer hara, no free will, and no independent desire, how can it be held accountable?

Rav Motel offers a remarkable answer. Implicit in every command is the possibility of refusal. If there is no ability to disobey, then it is not really a command. It is simply what happens.

The very moment Hashem commanded the earth to produce something in a particular way, the earth was given the possibility of choosing otherwise. Ordinarily, the earth

has no free choice. It has no yetzer hara because it is not given mitzvos and is not commanded. It simply fulfills the role assigned to it.



But this was different. Here, Hashem gave the earth a command. And with that command came something entirely new: the ability to choose whether or not to obey.

WHY?

Perhaps this gives us an answer to an even deeper question: **Why** did the earth choose not to obey? Why did it produce a tree whose bark did not taste like its fruit?

Maybe the answer lies in the very nature of the command. The earth understood that Hashem was not merely telling it what to produce. Hashem was giving it a choice. The fact that the earth was being commanded meant there was a reason that it now had the ability to say no.

Perhaps the earth thought that being commanded meant not just having the freedom to choose not to follow, but perhaps Hashem wanted the earth to disobey Him, because the world was better with trees whose bark did not taste like its fruit.

ר' מרדכי פוגרומנסקי

Rav Motel Pogromansky was born in Tavrig, Lithuania, in 1903. Unlike many other gedolim, he was raised in a more traditional environment, without a regular *cheder* education, and he didn't begin learning Gemara until his teenage years. Even before the age of thirteen, he was already running a successful business.

The Rav of Tavrig noticed his remarkable qualities, and when Rav Eliyahu Lopian came to recruit students for Kelm, he brought Rav Motel with him. Rav Lopian was extremely proud of this and remarked, "If I came to this world only for this, it was worth it," adding that it would be his passport to Olam Habah. According to Rav Motel's first tutor, he quickly advanced in his learning and became very proficient in Gemara. From Kelm he went on to Telz, where he immediately joined the highest shiur — something almost unheard of in the structured Telz Yeshivah. He became known as the Tavriker Illuy.

To illustrate his brilliance: at one point he realized that he had never learned Maseches Yevamos, so he spent three days and nights mastering the entire *masechta*.

By the age of twenty, he was already giving shiurim. He had a unique gift for explaining the most complex concepts with clarity, combining depth with eloquence. His *mussar va'adim* inspired *talmidim* deeply. Although he held himself to very high standards (as Rav Gifter attested), he was also worldly and practical, able to offer wise and grounded advice (as noted by Rav Dovid Zoretsky).

Rav Motel's legacy lived on especially through his close relationship with Rav Gifter, who later became Rosh Yeshivah of Telz. Rav Gifter often quoted his Torah and *mussar* ideas, praising him in many *sichos* and shiurim. In one letter, Rav Gifter described him as a true genius, noting that all the *gedolim* who met him were impressed by his mastery of both Torah and Aggadah.

Eventually, Rav Motel left Telz and learned in Kovno, where he impressed the city's Rav, the Dvar Avraham. The Dvar Avraham wrote that "even hundreds of years ago, he would have been considered an *illuy*."

He survived World War II in the Kovno Ghetto through numerous miracles. After the war, he made his way to France, where he devoted himself to helping survivors — offering emotional support, guidance, and *mussar*. He became involved in the newly established Yeshivah there.

In 1949, he married Bluma Shtrom, but tragically, he passed away just a year later — on 25 Shevat 1950.

Although he gave many *shiurim* and *shmuessen* throughout his life, inspiring countless talmidim, only one of his articles was published during his lifetime — in a Telz Torah journal in 1939. Rav Dovid Cynamon later published *Doresh Tov*, based on what he heard from Reb Shimon Segal, who had been with Rav Motel in the Kovno Ghetto.

A few years ago, Rav Dov Eliach collected and organized everything known about this gaon and produced a masterpiece biography spanning 592 pages. Recently, Rav Moshe Shternbuch also published many of his own remarkable encounters with Rav Motel. Rav Moshe Shternbuch relates that Rav Motel did not attend the funeral of the Dvar Avraham because he feared they would announce him as the new Rav of Kovna, and he did not want to assume a leadership role. Rav Motel regretted the decision because, "these types of thoughts should not prevent one from fulfilling the mitzvah of going to a funeral."

שרגא פייבל

Reb Shraga Feivel (Frankie Wilson) Weinberger (4 Adar II 1951 – 22 Elul 2026) sheloshim is this week.

Although he went through personal challenges in various ways he returned to Yiddishkeit after nearly five decades to become an extremely impressive baal teshuvah. He learned for many hours from his ArtScroll tablet. He had a seder each day with chavrusos. This is besides his personal daily quota of learning chumash Kitzur

Shulchan aruch, Tanya, among

other sedorim. He prepared and he chazered for each shiur.

A close friend compared Reb Shraga Feivel to the famous "Yossela" from the time of the Tosafos Yom Tov. He was not known publicly as a very big baal tzedakah, but Reb Shraga Feivel quietly funded - in the tens of thousands of dollars - shoe cards for children, Purim learning programs, tefillin, and chasunos, and almost no one knew. He believed his sole purpose was to be able to give tzedakah and learn, and those were his only goals during the last few years of his life.

He passed away after drinking the kos shel brachah of Birkas Hamazon, leaving the world after thanking Hashem for the abundant parnassah that allowed him to share his wealth with so many others.

Although he passed away without children, the tzedakah that he gave and the sums allocated in tzavah are his "eternal toldos."

