

## Rosh HaShanah 5783

### Paradise Found

In 1969, Joni Mitchell was supposed to go to Max Yasgur's farm in Bethel, New York to perform in the Woodstock Music and Arts Festival. Her manager convinced her that she should skip the concert so she could appear instead on the Dick Cavet show. Which she did, much to her regret. As she sat in her New York hotel room and watched the news about Woodstock, she wrote the words that best captured the hope of that gathering:

We are stardust  
We are golden  
And we've got to get ourselves  
Back to the garden

The garden is the Garden of Eden, *Gan Eiden* in Hebrew. For Rock 'n Roll fans, *In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida*. It is a reference to the creation of humanity and the promise of a life of harmony and peace, blessings that didn't quite work out. The Garden of Eden remains an elusive promise. As hard as we try, it seems that we are forever taking one step forward and two steps back, falling further and further away from that garden.

On this first day of the New Year, Rosh HaShanah 5783, as we reflect on our personal and individual circumstances, it is appropriate to take stock of humanity.

Throughout ancient Jewish literature, there are several versions of an imagined debate that the angels had with God as to whether or not humans deserved to be created. In one telling, the Angel of Love favored the creation of human beings because of our tendency to be affectionate and loving. The Angel of Truth objected because humans would be prone to lying and deceit. The Angel of Justice favored the creation because humans would practice justice. But the Angel of Peace was opposed because we would be prone to fits of anger and get into fights. While they were arguing, God created Adam and Eve.

There are many levels of meaning and interpretation in that midrash. One is that we are imbued with impulses for **both** good and bad: the *Yetzer Tov* and the *Yetzer HaRa*. That is, each person has complex and often competing interests and passions, and it is up to each individual to decide which impulse is dominant. Our journey is not preordained. We are not prisoners of fate. Rather, we have choice.

Yes, the *Untaneh Tokef* prayer expresses a litany of consequences that await us. But it concludes that *teshuvah*, *t'filah*, and *tzedakah* avert the severity of the decree. Renewal, prayer, and charity restore us.

Our actions determine our future. The act of *teshuvah*, which is often translated as “repentance”, is more accurately an expression of “returning” and “renewal. It is striving still to get back to that promise of goodness. Back to the Garden.

A thousand years after the midrashim imagined Angels debating the efficacy of humanity, Thomas Hobbes and Jacques Rousseau gave it a try. In 1651, Hobbes published his book Leviathan in which he maintained that human beings were by nature selfish creatures with a tendency to be solitary, poor, nasty and brutish. In order to keep the brutes in place, humans created governments and laws. Police were empowered to enforce those laws, all to keep us from destroying one another.

Rousseau’s masterwork, Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality Among Mankind, published a century after Hobbes’s work, was a direct contradiction of Hobbes. Rousseau believed that originally, humans were hunter-gatherers, living in tiny egalitarian bands. This blissful existence was overwhelmed because of the Agricultural Revolution. As

populations increased, we concentrated in cities. That led to rise of hierarchies: people in power, rich versus poor, and governments that tried to control the mob through bureaucracy and force.

The choice between Hobbes and Rousseau is rather unattractive and unnecessary. Recently, the distinguished professor of archaeology David Wengrow and the brilliant anthropologist the late David Graeber co-wrote the extraordinary book, The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity. They dismiss Hobbes and Rousseau with the cheeky critique that both are simply wrong; that their perspectives have dire political implications; and that they “make the past needlessly dull.” Wengrow and Graeber assemble compelling evidence that the story of humanity is far too complex and varied to be pigeon-holed into neat political or sociological theories.

In comparison, the Garden of Eden story and the subsequent midrashim and commentaries offer enlightened insights into human character. They are metaphors for our human potential, our failures, hopes, fears, and yes, our capacity for goodness and evil. Please note that those who choose to read the Bible as historically and literally accurate will miss the point. The great 12<sup>th</sup> century sage, Moses Maimonides, wrote critically about those who would read scripture as they would a simple novel and thereby miss

the profound metaphorical inspirations in the text. However, when read as a **metaphor** for humanity, the insights in Torah are both spiritually and psychologically profound. So, let's look closer.

The story of the fall from grace is well known. God places Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and to guard it (*ovdah ul-shomrah*).

Earlier, they had been instructed to be fruitful and multiply (*pru u'rvu*) and permitted to eat of all the vegetation and of every fruit bearing tree. Only later (Gen. 2:17) is it clarified that they may not eat of one particular tree, that is: the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (*eitz hada'at tov va'ra*).

Commentators differ as to what kind of fruit was forbidden. Some believe that the fruit was figs because Adam and Eve later covered themselves with fig leaves. Others believe that the fruit was grapes (because consuming wine gives you the false sense of wisdom and might). Some sages speculated that it was an *etrog* or even wheat. Apples came rather late to the Middle East, but who knows, maybe they indulged on an early version of a Macintosh and that led them to exploring forbidden sights.

Regardless, the Torah doesn't specify the kind of fruit because that is beside the point. Rather, it was the act of disobeying the one and only rule

that signaled the downfall. But why? What was so bad about eating the forbidden fruit?

There are those who protest: “Why was it wrong to eat of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge? Was the Torah against humans learning about the world? Was the Biblical ideal the bliss of ignorance?”

Of course, what they are missing is an understanding of the actual text. Again, the text reads: “the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (*eitz hada’at tov va’ra*).” The prohibition was not against knowledge. Rather, it was against the arrogance of assigning the adjectives “good” and “evil” to things around us.

Knowledge and intelligence were humanity’s defining characteristics, elevating us to the top of the animal kingdom. Adam’s first act was to discern the essence of all creatures and then name them. Adam and Eve were blessed with the intelligence to discern truth from falsehood. But assigning the label “good” and “evil” was forbidden. Why? As Maimonides wrote in the *Moreh Nevukhim*, Guide for the Perplexed (1.2 14b), as soon as they ate the fruit they “became absorbed in judging things to be bad or good.”

What was the first thing that Adam and Eve determined was bad or evil?

And the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked (Gen. 3:7).

They were already aware of what their respective bodies looked like. But now they judged that their bodies were naked, embarrassing, and bad. And when God asks, *ai-ye-kah* “*Where are you?*” Adam answered, “I hid from you because I was afraid because I was naked.” God, responds, “Who told you that you were naked?”

We know that it was none other than Adam and Eve themselves who told themselves that their very bodies were bad and shameful. And thus began the long and painful tendency we humans have of assigning the labels good and evil to others and to ourselves.

From the “fall from Grace” after Eden, we have not only judged our personal appearance bad (leading to the disastrous consequences of self-esteem issues and body shaming), we have also become addicted to judging others, most often in the negative. I don’t have to elaborate this point. Each of us has plenty of experiences both as perpetrators and victims of harsh judgements. So, the metaphorical lesson of the prohibition against eating that fruit that would turn us into arbiters of “good” and “bad”

was not against knowledge. Rather, it was against hubris, arrogance, and judgementalism.

Let's turn to another lesson from Eden, one that is hinted at but not elaborated in the Torah, one that is drawn in midrashim as well in classic works like John Milton's Paradise Lost. I'm referring to the daily life of Adam and Eve before the fall. Milton pictures them carrying out a blissful, playful life of discovery and contemplation. Their duties of working and guarding the Garden were not burdens to endure. Rather, their tasks brought them a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment of purpose. They took pleasure in each other's company: marveling in the wonders all around them, collecting food for dinner, offering prayers of thanksgiving, flirting, and reveling in the enchantments of love.

Life in the Garden was not witless; it was not the bliss of ignorance. Rather, the midrashic imaginings of that life paint a metaphor of the idyllic. A life in which one feels a sense of purpose. A life in which one's loving partner is also your best friend. A life in which one's daily tasks are fulfilling. A life in which the wonders of the world continually surprise and delight; where one's senses are alive with curiosity: smells, tastes, colors that entice and thrill the eye, sounds that charm and enchant the ear, and touch that soothes, comforts, and energizes one's entire being.



In short, each of us has had moments of such an Eden. The Hebrew word *Eden* means “pleasure.” We have all experienced moments when everything seems just right: moments of such joy and comfort that we wish that time itself would pause, pause right here, right now, so we could savor it a little longer.

Even after those blissful experiences have passed and we have to get back to work, back to school, clean the house, take out the trash, and pay the bills, we carry the memory of Eden with us. Those memories lift us. They elevate us and keep us from reducing life to the humdrum and banal. Eden is **not** a happy place that we go to in order to escape. Rather, Eden is the idea of finding pleasure in the simple act of living. Eden is a state of mind that can be realized wherever we are and whenever we activate it. Eden is an attitude. It is an attitude that stands not in judgement of good or bad but in celebration of what is true: the simple but blessed truth that we are alive. Eden is not a vacation from life. It is that which finds the sublime in living. But how is Eden possible when we are still struggling with the weight of a pandemic? Even now, as we begin to peek our heads out and interact more in public, we still have the messages sent to us of this one or that who came down with a COVID variation: Alpha, Beta, Delta, or Omicron.

And it is perhaps too much for us to be speaking about Eden as we witness the brutal Russian invasion of Ukraine, the saber rattling by China around Taiwan, the heartbreaking scene at our nation's borders, rising crime rates, the pitiful scenes of the homeless, the potential of a nuclearized Iran, and political upheaval and gamesmanship that threatens the very foundation of our American democracy. No, I'm not here to paint a rosy picture of the world. We know all too well that humanity was cast out of Eden long ago. But therein lies the importance of the Biblical story and the midrashic imaginings. After Eden, after the fall, after the loss, there still was love and life.

Yes, there also was conflict, struggle, and strife. Those complexities are the very essence of life, and they are metaphorically captured in the Torah and the commentaries. Torah holds up a mirror to human character, showing us both our human flaws and our potential greatness. We see how our ancestors learned from defeat; how they rebuilt after loss; how they kept hope after disappointment; and that no matter what, they never gave up. Indeed, never give up. Never despair of a better tomorrow. Discover that piece of Eden that resides within each of us. It peeks out at times, perhaps surprising us, reminding us, thrilling us with the sweetness of life itself.

The challenge for us as we enter the New Year 5783 is to get back to that Garden. Get back in love with life. Renew the joy, wonder, and appreciation of the simple act of being alive.

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