

Some ideas from this sermon *How Good Do We Have To Be* by Rabbi Harold Kushner

In just two weeks we again begin our Torah reading from Bereshit, Genesis. After learning about the creation of the universe in Chapters 1 and 2, we read about the Garden of Eden. The main participants in this story are Adam, Hava, the snake and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. We tend to think of this story as one that teaches us about loss of innocence, sinning, punishment and withholding of forgiveness.

Here's what we are told. God made this gorgeous garden with everything anybody would want to make them happy. Right in the center of the Garden God placed the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and immediately told Adam that if he ate from it, he would die. That action alone seems to make us wonder about this story. Would God really have tempted Adam and Hava like that? I suspect not unless He really wanted them to eat from it.

The snake tells Hava how wonderful the fruit from that tree would be to eat. She tells him that God said anyone who **touches** the tree will die. We don't know where she got that information but it certainly isn't what God told Adam. The snake touches the tree, showing her that she will not die if she touches it. This is enough for her. She eats the fruit and then gives it to Adam who also eats it. Suddenly they feel embarrassed because they notice they are naked.

God seems to be unhappy when he finds out what the three of them did and tells them how their lives will change because of their actions. The snake is told he will crawl on his belly (apparently he'd been walking on two legs before that). Hava is told she'll have pain in childbirth and has to do what her husband tells her to do. Adam is told he will always have to work for what he wants. Adam and Hava are banished from the Garden.

God seems to be punishing them for disobeying His command. But let's look at this story a little more closely.

Of all the questions we could ask about it, the one that is most compelling is before they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, did Adam and Hava know what evil was. If they didn't, they could not have known it was wrong to eat from the tree. Then why would they be punished for making a mistake, for being imperfect?

Before answering that question, let's look at the purpose of our Bible. According to Dr. James Bowley, associate professor in the Religious Studies Department at Millsaps College, the Torah was always meant to be read as metaphoric literature and not as actual history. The Torah, and all spiritual and religious writings were created to help people understand the awe and confusion they felt at the unexplainable events of the universe. It gave meaning and perspective to what could not be logically explained.

If we look at the Garden of Eden story through that lens, we can see it as a story not about punishment and sin but about the beginning of consciousness, the demarcation between the animal and the human worlds. Adam and Hava by their act of learning about good and evil took themselves away from being amoral like animals

to becoming moral human beings. In this story Adam and Hava are tempted by the fruit, the way any animal would be if we put something they want in front of them.

But once Adam and Hava understand good and evil, once they can see what we humans are all too aware of, they understand that they have choices about how they live their lives in a way that animals will never have.

That's why they feel embarrassed at being naked. It is the nakedness of awareness, of knowing that their actions could have negative consequences. They are feeling embarrassed in the same way we do when we make a mistake. And of course, they want to hide their mistake and their embarrassment from God.

So we can now see the Garden of Eden as a story, not about sinfulness but about consciousness and morality. No wonder God told Adam he had to work for a living. If he lived in our time, he would have to decide what kind of career he wanted to do. He would have to think about being ethical with co-workers, employees, customers and the competition. These are ethical and moral dilemmas.

And Hava in our modern world would have to think about how to have an ethical and moral relationship with her husband. Her enduring the pain of giving birth would translate into all the moral dilemmas that raising children entails.

From this perspective Hava is actually the heroine of this story, willing to venture into the unknown, to try something that hadn't been tried before, to ultimately live a life with purpose and meaning. That kind of seeking is, as we know, the source of all of our great inventions and innovations.

There's more that we can learn from Adam and Hava. Once they had left the Garden of Eden, they were profoundly aware of their humanness, their ability to make mistakes. They were face to face with the reality of their imperfections. These imperfections were always there but they had been hidden until Adam and Hava were forced to fend for themselves without God's constant intervention on their behalf. Then they had to consciously decide the most ethical and moral ways to live or fall into a life of immorality.

This is still our dilemma today. We may want our lives to be easy, to live in a metaphorical Garden of Eden or like the animals be amoral but we know we can't do that. We have to look at our actions and make decisions about them all the time, to ensure that we are as moral as possible.

But what we have kept from the Garden of Eden is the assumption that perfection is possible. Even though we know in an intellectual way that it's impossible, we still hold on to that assumption. Perhaps we learned that from our family, our teachers, our friends. Wherever it came from, each of us still feels the disappointment and sometimes shame when we do something wrong.

We tend to see ourselves in only two possible ways. Either we see ourselves as being completely perfect or as completely flawed. When we are given only those two choices, we of course choose not to see ourselves as completely flawed. But what that means is that we are not open to seeing our imperfections as normal and then trying to change them. We want to distance ourselves from them and that leads us to blame others for the things we don't want to accept in ourselves. We then see ourselves as right all the time and see others as wrong.

One of our biggest challenges is accepting our imperfection as a part of being human. Accepting that when we make mistakes, we will feel guilty. This feeling of

guilt can be used as a barometer. When we feel it, we can ask ourselves what mistake did we just make. Then we can correct the mistake, rather than trying to push that feeling away.

Even worse than guilt, which we feel when we judge ourselves for making a mistake, is shame. We feel this when we were judged by someone else. I suspect we can all think of at least one time when we felt judged and shamed in our childhood by someone else. We can probably still feel the physical sensation, maybe even still blush when we think about it even though it happened a long time ago. As much as we don't want to feel guilt, we even more want to avoid feeling shame. But it's avoiding either of those feelings that keeps us from looking deeply into ourselves to see first that our imperfections are normal and second how to change our behavior so that we do not make as many mistakes.

There are so many ways to work with this basic human dilemma. In our Torah we have stories about our ancestors. By far none of them were perfect, none of them expected to be. They give us role models of people who can change their behavior from selfish or sneaking or arrogant to holy. Joseph is a typical example of this. His arrogant behavior toward his brothers angered them so much that they sold him into slavery. That experience humbled him enough to be able to welcome them back into his life 20 years later without any anger.

We have a series of mitzvot that we are commanded to perform. These mitzvot give us another template of how to act in the world. When we give tzedakah, we always feel better. When we practice a mitzvah like Shabbat, we give ourselves the time to rest and reflect on our lives. When we do this we can see our mistakes more clearly and decide how to change.

There is a wonderful prayer that we say every morning. Elohai neshama shenatata bi t' hora he. My God the soul that You placed within me is pure. No matter what mistakes we make, no matter how we act toward others, we know that our soul is pure.

We have many examples of ethical writings, like Pirkei Avot, the teachings of our ancestors, that tell us how to treat others and how to see the world in an ethical, righteous way. Our Sages understood that our actions were a direct reflection of our connection with God and with holiness.

When God told Adam not to eat from the tree, we can imagine He was really telling him to eat from it. This was a wonderful gift God gave to Adam and to us. He gave us the gift of consciousness and morality. He showed us that even when we make mistakes, we are still loved unconditionally. God did not kill Adam for eating the fruit even though that's what He first threatened to do. He simply took him out of paradise and gave him the ability to feel love, compassion, concern, hope, gratitude. These feelings are what set us apart from animals.

We struggle all of our lives to feel as though we are enough. When we are born and when we die, we are exactly enough. But during all the time in between, we struggle to accept our imperfections. Our religion helps us choose the ways to live our lives in a more holy and gracious way. It does that by telling us how to act, not by telling us we are not good enough.

The more we accept our imperfections, the freer and more productive we become. When we are not judging ourselves, the less we will look over our shoulders to see who is judging us.

On this day at this time when we are about to remember the people who had such a profound influence in our lives, let's accept their imperfections as we accept our own. And let's work to do the best we can in our lives, each day doing better and better.

Gmar hatima tova and tzom kal. May we all be signed into the book of life and have an easy fast.