The Beast that Crouches  
at the Door

Adam & Eve *Cain &* Abel, and *Beyond*

A Tfflfjfiai Exploration RabEn~]Q@itd Fohrman

**deVora**

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£ Acknowledgments

Ш

НШв book had its beginnings on a cold winters night about ten Byears ago, in the parking lot of Johns Hopkins University, just outside Shaffer Hall.

I had been teaching a class on the Book of Genesis. That night we had been talking about Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and a group of students stayed afterwards to continue the discussion. Two of them - LeRoy Hoffberger and his wife, Rebecca - stayed longer than the others, and walked me to my car. In the Never-Never Land somewhere between my car and theirs, we lost ourselves probing the implications of this mysteri­ous story. Bundled up against the cold, our conversation lasted well into the night.

That conversation was the beginning of a long friendship be­tween the Hoffbergers and me. LeRoy and Rebecca cared deeply about the underlying meaning of this story, and more generally about how knowledge of Torah could and should inform ones life. LeRoy envisioned creating an institute devoted to the kind of Torah study we had been doing in our class at Johns Hopkins - and over time, he brought this vision to fruition. LeRoy founded the

Hoffberger Foundation for Torah Studies, and asked me to serve as its resident scholar.

Teaching Biblical themes had always been a passion of mine, but I never thought I would be lucky enough to devote my profes­sional life to this dream. The Hoffbergers have made that intense desire a reality for me. Through their efforts, a conversation in a parking lot has blossomed into countless classes - and now, at long last, a book. Along the way, they have become close friends, de­voted students, constructive critics - and surrogate grandparents to our kids. Gratitude is perhaps too pedestrian a word to express my feelings towards LeRoy and Rebecca. But maybe it’s a start. I am deeply privileged to call them partners in my life’s work.

Although LeRoy has been the driving force behind the foun­dation, he has not been alone in pursuing its aims. He and I would like to express gratitude to its other principal funders, including the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, the Hoffberger Family Foundation, and The Associated: Jewish Community Fed­eration of Baltimore.

There were many others who participated in the process <'©£ bringing this book from the realm of vision into reality. They in­dude Yaacov Peterseil, publisher at Devora Publishing, who early on saw merit in the manuscript, worked to procure it, and ably set about the process of bringing the book to fruition. Carol Wise skillfully edited the manuscript, and Azriella Jaffe, herself an ac­complished author, reviewed the entire book and made innumer­able meaningful suggestions. Daniella Barak capably managed the production process.

A book begins long before an author writes down what is on his mind. Before that, he has to actually have something on his mind. In that spirit, I want to acknowledge those who, over the years, helped shape my way of thinking, and guide my develop­ment as a student of Torah.

The person who perhaps most profoundly influenced my life and way of thinking was my late father, Moshe Fohrman, zfl, He died before I became a Bar Mitzvah, but in those early years,

taught me much of what I know about what makes life worth­while, and how to practice the art of living in a meaningful way.

He was not a scholar in the technical sense of the word, but he was one of the wisest persons I have been privileged to know. I hope that he would regard this book as a worthy expression of his spiritual legacy.

As I was growing up, I was lucky to be exposed to Rabbi Yosef Leibowitz, who now lives in Kfar Saba, Israel, but then was the rabbi of the shut in the San Francisco Bay Area to which our family belonged. I was fascinated by the way he read Biblical text, and found myself captivated by his sermons. I can still remem­ber our preparing my Bar Mitzvah speech together. He asked me **Ш** to read the Torah portion on my own, and to come back to him with questions about it that were of greatest concern to me. With these questions in the background, the words of the ancient com­mentators somehow seemed to jump off the page and brim with life. The whole process made me feel alive, and gave me a taste of a kind of learning I knew I would want to try and pursue.

I spent many years studying at the Ner Israel Rabbinical College, and I feel honored to count the Rosh Yeshiva of that institution, the late Rav Yaakov Weinberg **zt”U** as a mentor. As a young high school student, I didn’t know you weren’t supposed to call the Rosh Yeshiva up on the dorm phone to ask if you could drop by his home and chat about some questions. Somehow, that approach didn’t display the proper degree of reverence. But he graciously extended himself to me, and I was very fortunate to benefit from years of his guidance, wisdom and concern. Other faculty members at Ner Israel - including Rabbis Tzvi Berkowitz, Moshe Eisemann and Nachum Lansky - introduced new vistas of thinking to me. And weekly **hashkafa chaburos -** sessions in Jewish Philosophy - given by Rabbi Ezra Neuberger, grounded me in oft-overlooked “basics” of Jewish thought, and opened my mind to possibilities I found both tantalizing and profoundly meaningful.

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with Rabbi Hermann Neuberger, who - it sounds like a clichć but it’s true - was really like a father to me. I was often a guest at his home for Shabbos meals, and found myself intrigued by the con­versation and inspired by his persona. I am profoundly thankful for the strong interest he took throughout the years in my per­sonal development and welfare, and for his wise counsel, of which I availed myself frequently. I count myself fortunate in that I came to know not just him, but virtually all of his children as well. R’ Sheftel, R’ Shraga, R’ Yaakov, and R’ Ezra each opened their homes and hearts to me, and were mentors to me in their own right.

In later years, I came to treasure a friendship with Rabbi Yehezkel Danziger, editor in chief of ArtScrolTs Schottenstein Edi­tion of the Talmud. The observations he shared with me about life and Torah are precious - but besides that, he taught me much of what I know about writing with concision, precision and care. His ability to express complex ideas with elegance and simplicity is something I admire and seek to emulate.

Throughout the years, my mother has been a beacon of love and compassion, and an emotional bulwark of support to me and to the rest of our family. All mothers strive to do this, I suppose - but she has done it exceedingly well. When she married my step­father, Mr. Zev Wolfson, she brought into my life a man who has come to share her intense interest in my welfare and development. Over the years, he has guided my growth as a Jew and as a person, and I deeply cherish his love for me. For the last ten years or so, we have been chevrusas, study partners, together - sometimes in person, and sometimes by phone - and this has brought another, added, dimension to our relationship. I am proud to have become part of his family.

My wife Reena has been simultaneously my greatest fan and most incisive critic. If I can convince her of the merit of an idea, then I can convince anybody. Her loving attention to our chil­dren has helped us raise six wonderful kids. Her love for me and belief in my work have given me the strength and emotional sue-

tenance to go forward in life. I am privileged to have her as my life’s partner, and hope and pray we shall celebrate many more milestones together.

Part i

Serpents of Desire:  
Good and in the  
Garden of Eden

^ Introduction

Beyond the Lullaby Effect: Reading the Bible with Open Eyes

g

aradoxically enough, a great problem that faces us when we study the Torah is that its stories are so familiar to us. No matter where you grew up, no matter what level of education you’ve had, youve come across the story of Adam and Eve tens, if not hundreds, of times. We’ve heard the story in school, and weVe learned it at home. We drink Adam and Eve apple juice and see Adam and Eve icons repeatedly in advertising. We know that story, we assure ourselves. Indeed, we know the story too well for our own good.

When we know a story too well, we become easy prey to a syndrome I like to call the Lullaby Effect. The Lullaby Effect blocks our ability to ask, or even to see, the really important questions that the Bible begs us to ask of it. The Lullaby Effect anesthetizes us through the stupefying effects of familiarity.

Here’s how it works. When was the last time you bothered thinking about the words of the lullabies you ve known since [[1]](#footnote-1)

childhood? Stop for a moment and think - really think - about what their words actually mean. For starters, try that perennial favorite, “Rock-a-bye baby on the treetop.” Imagine your child were actually paying attention to the words you were singing: “. .. when the bough breaks, the cradle will fall, and down will come baby cradle and all”

Now, you can certainly get a kid to sleep by singing this. But if your sweet child were actually listening to what you were sing­ing, she’d be in for a rude awakening. Lots of questions, I imagine, would quiddy come to mind. If we bothered listening, they would come to our mind, too. “Exactly how far off the ground was the cradle when it fell?” “Did anyone call 911?” “Who put the cradle on the bough in the first place?” “Was the parent trying to get rid of the child?” “Are you trying to get rid of me?” ,

But no one asks these questions. Few of us are even remotely disturbed by the violence we sing about when trying to, get our children to sleep. Why? Because weve simply stopped listening to the words. We have heard them too many times. We heard them ■ as children before we even knew what they meant; and now, even as adults, they fail to shock us.

Biblical stories are a lot like lullabies in that way. Almost ev­ery major story in the Torah has its “elephant in the room” - some major problem, or a series of them, that cries out to be addressed. Why would God tell Abraham to take his son and kill him, only to retract at the last moment and say He didn’t really mean it? What, exactl y, did God have against the building of a tower in the Land of Babel? Why would God bother bargaining with Pharaoh to let the Jew s go, only to harden his heart once the Egyptian monarch finally agreed? But the stories are too familiar to us. We’ve heard about them so many times, they’ve become part of our cultural fabric. We absorb the stories through osmosis, the jyay vyg un­thinkingly develop accents that reflect the place where we grew up. We fail to see the problems anymore.

In this book, I’m going to challenge you to change all that. Come along with me on a iournev, an advw+”" ■■ ’ 1

text. Lets read these stories that we thought we knew with fresh eyes and ask the questions that any intelligent reader would ask aboutjthem.

If this idea makes you nervous, relax. We needht fear these questions, for they are not reallyproblems; they are opportuni­ties. They are windows that the text gives, us to perceive its deeper meaning. Sure, you can keep the window closed and pretend it isn’t there. But if you don’t open it, the treasure that lies beyond - a richer, three-dimensional understanding of the Torah, not to men­tion the entire world of rabbinic literature - will remain sealed off to you forever.

So here’s the deal before you go any further, I invite yon first of all to re-read the story of Adam, Eve, and the serpent in the Gar­den of Eden. If you know Hebrew, read it in Hebrew; and if you don’t, read it in translation. For the lime being, any translation will do. Yes, I know, you know the story already - ever since sixth grade, you’ve had this image in your mind of the snake wound around the tree, offering Eve an apple. But that’s precisely the point You need to forget all that. You need to erase those images and read the story anew. You need to break the Lullaby Effect

Read the story slowly and carefully. Just the text; no com­mentaries. And as you do, ask yourself these questions: If I were reading this for the first time, what about it would strike mp strange? What are the “big questions” that the Torah wants me to ask about this story? What are the elephants in the room? Take some time to think about it. I’ll meet you right back here and we’ll compare notes.

See you then.

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In this book, I’m going to challenge you to change all that Come along with me on a journey, an adventure through biblical

text. Let’s read these stories that we thought we knew with fresh eyes and ask the questions that any intelligent reader would ask about them.

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See you then.

ј£' Chapter One

Adam, Eve, and the Elephant in the Room

I 1 kay, lets say you’ve taken some time to re-read the story

of Adam, Eve, and the snake. (If you haven’t, you can read my short summary below.) Hopefully, you ve read it with fresh eyes and asked yourself that very basic of questions: “What is strange about this picture?” Before getting to your conclusions, lets take a moment to revisit the basic storyline together. In a nutshell, here it is:

After creating a world, God fashions two human beings and places them in Paradise, the Garden of Eden. God gives them virtually free reign over the territory. There’s only one restric­tion: a certain tree is off-limits - the tree labeled “the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.” The fruit of this tree must not be,eaten under any circumstances,

It doesn’t take long for the human beings to transgress the only prohibition given to them. At the behest of a myste­rious snake, Eve eats from the tree and shares the fruit with Adam. The Almighty becomes afljgry and hands out various

punishments: the snake? No more walking upright for him;

' he must crawl on his belly and eat dust The woman? Genera­tions of her kind will endure pain in conception and child­birth. And the man? He and his progeny will have to work by the sweat of their brow to make bread. And just to round things out death is meted out to all the parties; nobody gets to live forever anymore.

Moreover, Eden is placed off-limits; everyone has to find somewhere else to five now. The great Lifeguard in the Sky has blown His whistle and its time for everybody to get out of the pool. Why? Because theres another mysterious tree in the Garden - the Tree of Life - and the last thing God wants is anyone eating anything from that tree.

Well, what are the issues here? Does the story Sit well with you, or do you find yourself uneasy with it? If you are uneasy, can you identify exactly why you are uneasy?

As I mentioned earlier, many biblical stories have their “el- ephant in the room,” an obvious, deeply troubling, “why-didn t-I- think-of-that” question at the heart of the story. Is there a question of this sort, a question of this magnitude, that we need to address when reading the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden?

I think there is.

Let’s talk a little bit about this mysterious tree in the Garden, the one that God places off-limits. It has a name. It is known as the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. By any measure, that’s a pretty strange name for a tree, but if that’s what the Bible calls it, then that’s presumably what it is. It somehow conveys a knowl­edge of good and evil, an ability to distinguish right from wrong, to those who partake of its fruits.

But theres a big problem with this. Why would God want to deny this knowledge to people? Think about it. Are human be­ings better or worse off for their knowledge of good and evil? Is knowing right from wrong an asset or a liability for humanity? Imagine a wodd in which people are pretty much the same as they

are now. They are smart; they can walk; they can talk; they can drive cars and become investment bankers. They are missing only one thing. They don’t know right from wrong. We have a word for people like this. We call them sociopaths.

A person with all the faculties we associate with humanity except for the capacity to understand right and wrong is some­one who could slaughter people with an axe the way you and I mow the lawn. Bid God really want to create a society filed with such people? Clearly, people are better off when they know the difference, between right and wrong. So why would God want to withhold this knowledge?

A tempting way out of the dilemma would he to suggest that somehow it was all a set-up. God really did want people to have the knowledge the tree would give them and was in fact glad when they ate from it But this approach is deeply problematic. For the way the Torah tells the .story, the Almighty seems pretty disap- ppmted'iwith Adam and Eve when they eat from the tree. In fact, He punishes them severely. How are we to understand this dis­appointment? It seems rather perverse to imagine the Almighty secretly chuckling with pleasure that Adam and Eve finally ate Iithe fruit He put off limits while hiding this joy behind a mask of displeasure and anger.

Clearly, God really did want Adam and Eve to avoid the Tree of Knowledge. But that brings us backto our question: why would the Lord want to deny humanity an understanding of good and evil?

Catch-22 in the Garden

Actually, the question goes even deeper. It’s not simply that it seems straqge for Gqd to have put a Tree of Knowledge off-limits to Adam and Eve, Rather, the very existence of such a.tree seems to create a basic contradiction in the story as a whole. Here’s why:

What happens immediately after Adam and Eve eat from this tree whose fruits confer knowledge of good and evil? The Al­mighty becomes angry with them and punishes them. But if Adam and Eve were punished for what they did, this presupposes they knew their actions were wrong. You don’t punish people who are unaware that they did something bad. So Adam and Eve evidently had some knowledge of good and evil before eating from thetree. At the very least, they knew it was right to obey God when He told them not to eat from it, and it was wrong to disobey Him.

But now were really stuck. For if Adam and Eve already un­derstood the categories of good and evil before reaching for the fruit, well then, they already possessed what the tree was supposed to give them. **What then,** would be the **purp**ose.o£the-tree?

It’s a catch-22.

This is a very serious dilemma. This is not like wondering why the Torah included an extra word in a verse or why Rashi quoted one Midrash over another. Those are interesting questions, but if you don’t have the answer to them, you can stih sleep at night. **On** the other hand, the question we have just raised, **~^didn£ Ad&n and Eve already have the** knowledge the tree was supposed to give **them?** **- is fundamental** Its basic. Its the kind **of** question that you **do** lose sleep over. For as long as you are stuck with this question, the story of Adam and Eve simply fails to make any sense at all.

So how are we to deal with this problem? I’d like to sketch the outline of an approach that we may ultimately find useful.

A World Beyond Good and Evil

Perhaps we’ve been the victims of faulty premises. We’ve casually assumed that we knew what kind of knowledge the tree gave to Adam and Eve - a knowledge of good and evil, of right and wrong. But on second thought, just because it’s called a Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil doesn’t mean that Adam and Eve were ignorant of morality beforehand **It just means** that they **didn’**t c**all** moralify "knowledge of good and evil.” They called it something else.

The approach **1** am suggesting here is not my own. It is, in fact, the approach taken by Maimonides, the Rambam. Indeed, in his Guide to the Perplexed, Rambam considers the very same ques­tion we have advanced here: why would God want to withhold

knowledge of good and evil from us? And the answer hp gjves is this: the tree didn’t give us an understanding of right and wrong when we had none before. Rather it transformed this understand­ing from one thing into another It transformed our earlier under­standing of right and wrong into something called a Knowledge of Good and Evil.

If this seems a little obscure, try thinking about it this way: nowadays, when we do something right, we think of it as “good.” And when we do something wrong, we think of it as “evil” But, Rambam contends, those are not the most natural terms one could possibly use. Those terms became relevant to us - they became part of our vocabulary, as it were - only after we ate from the tree and assimilated knowledge of good and evil In the world of Eden, in the world before “the.Tree” the words “good” and “evil” would have seemed strange and inappropriate. Yes, we would have been aware of right and wrong, but we would not have called this “good and evil.” We would have thought about it differently We would have called it something else.

What exactly was that “something else”? What would it mean to think about right and wrong in the world of Eden, in the “pre- Tree” world? That, indeed, is the $64,000 question. To some extent, we are reaching beyond ourselves even to ask this question. To ask is to try and understand a world we no longer know, a world in which right and wrong looked, felt, and seemed vastly different than they do now. But try we must, for the Torah suggests that it was that world which was the more genuine one. And it is to that world that we strive to return.

Uncovering the nature of right and wrong in the pristine world of Eden will be one of the central tasks before us in the chapters ahead. But before we tackle that complex issue, we need to assemble some more data. So for now, it’s back to the drawing board. It’s time to explore some of the other questions the story of Adam and Eve holds out to us.

£ Chapter Two

A Tale of Two Trees

U

ntil now\* weVe concentrated on the mysterious Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. But there was more than one special tree in the Garden. For God also created a second, mysterious tree in Paradise - the Tree of Life:

God made grow out of the ground every tree pleasant to look at and good to eat, [including] the Tree of Life in the middle of the Garden, and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (Genesis 2:9).

Throughput the Eden story, фе Tree pf Life remains tai\|aliz- inglyinthe background^Itis created but then virtually disappears from the discussion. What role does this second tree play in the story, and how are we to understand its meaning?

Although the Tree of Life may be out of sight, it is not out pf mind. Toward the end of the story, after Adam and Eve have eaten the Forbidden Fruit, we once again hear of the Tree of Life:

God said, ‘Man has now become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now he must be prevented from putting forth

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his hand and also taking from the Tree of Life. He [can] eat it and live forever!’ (Genesis 3:22).

Here is God’s reason for exiling Adam and Eve from Eden. They are sent away to ensure that they will never eat from the Tree of Life. But there’s something quite odd about this, for in reading the story we never find that Adam was told to stay away from the Tree of Life in the first place. If God thought it was such an awful idea for humankind to eat from the Tree of Life, why did He not command them to avoid it, as He did concerning the other spe­cial tree, the Tree of Knowledge?

Just to complicate matters., the Tree Qf Li£e\_was\_centEaJJLy; located in “the middle of the Garden” (Genesis, 2:9), yet Adam and Eve were never warned to avoid its fruit. Indeed, it is unclear whether they even knew that it was a special tree at all. Eventually, what was going to happen? Clearly, it was only a matter of time before someone ate from its fruit.

So the plot thickens. Evidently, God didn’t mind Adam and Eve eating from the Tree of Life. He apparently even desired that they eventually eat from it. But all that was before eating from the Tree of Knowledge. After eating from the Tree of Knowledge, somehow, everything changes. Now, the Tree of Life becomes off-limits. Every effort must be taken to ensure that humankind never eats from it.

Why? What accounts for this curious relationship between the trees? Why is the Tree of Life fine to eat from before partak­ing from the Tree of Knowledge, but not after? That’s one point we’ll want to return to. But were not done yet exploring the mys­terious relationship between these two trees. Indeed, we are just beginning.

The Cherubs with the Flaming Sword

When God expels the humans from the Garden, the Almighty

places angels with a flaming sword at the entrance to “guard the

way [back to] the Tree of Life” (Genesis 3:24). These angels are of a very particular kind. They are cherubs. (For those of you who enjoy Renaissance art, that’s the kind of angel that Rubens always liked to paint, although I don’t know why he thought he knew what they looked like.) Now, as it happens, a cherub is a relatively rare kind of angel. Throughout the entire Five Books of Moses, we find them only in two places. Besides their appear­ance here, guarding the Tree of Life, they are mentioned just once more. Placed atop the Holy Ark in the Tabernacle are (wo cher­ubs, fashioned out of gold: “Make two golden cherubs, hammer­ing them out from the two ends [of the ark]... The cherubs shall spread their wings upward so that their wings shield the larks] cover...” (Exodus 25:18; 25:20).

Now go one step farther. What treasure was this second pair of cherubs guarding - these only other cherubs in the entire five Books of Moses? They were, of course, guarding the Ten Com­mandments that were inside the ark. They were guarding the To­rah. Those who attend synagogue on the Sabbath will he familiar with the words I am thmking c»f right now. You say them every week, as the Torah is raised aloftfrom the bimaSctr all to see: “It iga tree pf life to all wfrp grab hold.of it” (Proverbs \*n.&L

Fascinating. The only other timg we meet cherubs in the en­tire Chumash, they are once again guarding a “Tree of Life” Only this time, they are not keeping us away from the Tree of Life; jhey are ushering us towards it, shielding both us and the Torah be­neath their protective wings.

What are we to make of this? Why are the cherubs who keep us away from the original Tree of Life trying to give us access to a second such tree? What does it even mean to call the Torah “a Tree of Life”? Is there an essential similarity between the two?

The skeptic inside you might dismiss all this as coincidence. Cherubs here, cherubs there, cherubs, cherubs, everywhere. But if we explore further, we will find that there are still other links that connect the Torah with the Tree of Life...

Do the Tree of Knowledge and the  
Tree of Life Contradict Each Other?

Try this question on for size; What were Adam and Eve like before eating from either tree, the Tree of Knowledge or the Tree of Life? Were they mortal or immortal?

We know that Adam was warned not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, because “on the day that you eat from it, you will surely die” (Genesis 2:17). The classic commentator Nachman- ides observes that the verse cant mean that the fruit immediately kills you, for, in feet, Adam and Eve went on to live for a long time after eating the Forbidden Fruit. Rather, the verse. seems, to mean “on the day that you eat from the fruit you wilLhecome mortalT Le. you will immediately become transformed into,be- ings that eventually die. Ihis, apparently, is the meaning of God’s warning.

So the Tree of Knowledge proves that Adam and Eve were originally immortal, right? Wrong. Lets see what the Tree of Life adds to our understanding.

The Torah tells us that God banished Adam and Eve from Eden “lest they eat from the Tree of Life and live forever.” Well, the verse seems pretty dear: the fruit of the Tree of Life confers immortality. Once you eat it, you will never die. So if the Tree of Life makes you immortal - well, that seems to mean you were mortal beforehand.

But wait a minute. I thought we said just a minute ago that Adam and Eve started out being immortal.

Something strange is going on with these trees. The Tree of Knowledge seems to tell us that man would originally have lived forever. But the Tree of Life seems to tell us that he was originally a being that would die. At face value, the two trees seem to con­tradict themselves.

But only at face value. There’s a way out of the contradiction.

A surprising alternative exists about the original nature of Adam and Eve that would resolve the problem.

The Garden of Eden and

the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle

The alternative is this: both trees are right Mankind, before eating

from either tree, was neither mortal nor immortaL If he ate from

the Tree of Life, he would become immortal; if he ate from the Tree

of Knowledge, he would become a being that dies. In that moment

though, before eating from either tree, he was in die “twilight zone”

He was perched precariously between mortality and immortality,

but, as of yet, his nature was undetermined.

If such an “undetermined, stater seems strange to you, don’t fret. Just repair to the library and pick up any book on quantum physics. Accordingto this J^ageh of science, it is a pretty standard feature pf reality for things to be undetermined. At any one mo­ment, a given electron maybe here, or it maybe there, Heisenberg famously proclaimed, but right now it is neither here nor there. Its position becomes “determined” only once an observer steps in and looks at it Well, if electrons can remain undetermined, maybe people can as well.

Now, if we’re right about ah of this - that Eden was a place where Adam was precariously placed between life and death, de­pending on his choice - well, then, it would seem that Eden eerily foreshadows another great moment of Jewish history. It reminds us of another, later time, when we were neither here nor there, and the Almighty offered us a similar choice between life and death: “See! Today I have set before you [a free choice] between life and good [on onejidgl^and death apdeyjllpp the other]..„Now therefore, choose life!” (Deuteronomy чолдло).

When Moses uttered these words, the people stood in the wasteland of a desert, not yet possessing either the “life” or the “death” that lay before them. On that occasion, too, we was asked to choose. In that case, “life” was identified as embracmgthe Torah and its principles, while “death” meant rejecting them.

Strange. The choice to embrace the Torah or reject it is painted with the same brush as the choice to embrace the lree

of Life. The cherubs that guard one tree guard the other “tree” the Torah. It might be just a coincidence, a convenient choice of metaphors. But it might also signify something deeper. What could it all mean?

We have a long way to go, but we are starting to get some­where in developing our picture of the two mysterious trees in Eden. In upcoming chapters, we will lay out some other puzzle pieces in the grand saga of Adam and Eve in Eden. And then, once the jigsaw pieces are all out on the floor, we’ll begin, bit by bit, to discern the picture they reveal.

^ Chapter Three

The Dark Side of Paradise

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Нће Bible is rife with conflict between characters who exemplify good and evil. While our sympathies may lie with whichever characters align themselves with the “good,” these characters are not always the center of the story. Consider, as an example, the narrative of Cain and Abel. The story isn’t about AbeL We know virtually nothing about him - he is killed, and he disappears. Like it or hot, the story is really about Cain. What brought him to mur­der another person? What did his inner world look like? What did God mean to tell him just before he killed his brother? And did he really ever achieve forgiveness?

Who are the main characters in the story of the Forbidden Fruit in the Garden of Eden? Our first impulse is to point to Adam and Eve. But maybe the story is about someone else, too - the snake. He’s not a very popular being, certainly not a hero, but per­haps the story is about him almost as much as it is about us. Let’s spend some time trying to understand his role in the story.

What Do We Know About the Snake?

In teaching this story before various audiences, I find that stu­dents often speculate about the identity of the snake. Some peg

him as “the Devil” 1 a sort of fallen angel, a powerful “enemy of God” who seeks to thwart the divine plan at every turn. As a Jew, I have difficulty with the notion of an independent source of evil in the universe serving as a counterweight to God. Jewish thought tends to see Satan in different terms, not as one who opposes the divine plan, but as a sort of “heavenly prosecutor,” who is part and parcel of the divine plan. Just as no earthly court is complete without a prosecutor, so too, the Heavenly Court is incomplete without its “prosecutor,” a being who forcefully advocates for the application of divine justice in full rigor.

Was the snake, then, a manifestation of an angelic Satan - whoever this Satan is? Maybe, but when I read the text, I see an animal here. One could argue that the angel is disguised in the form of an animal, but lets at least give it a whirl and see if we can make the text understandable without resort to Satan. Let’s say the snake is an animal. What does he want? How are we to understand him?

Let’s begin by gathering some pertinent information. From the text of the Torah, what do we know about this snake? Well, for starters, he talks - not very snake-like at all. And to make mat­ters worse, we’re not even supposed to be surprised that he talks. When, for example, the Torah relates the story of Bila’am and his talking donkey (Numbers 23), we are clearly meant to be surprised by the animals speech. But here in Genesis, the snake’s capacity for language just seems to be a given. The Torah tells us that one day a snake approached Eve and happened to strike up a conver­sation. Don’t be surprised. That’s just the way it is.

And it gets even more puzzling. The snake doesn’t only talk. He walks, too. We know this because at the end of the story, the snake is cursed by God - and the curse states that from this point forward, the snake must crawl on his belly and eat dust. The im­plication is clear: before that point, the snake was not a creature that crawled. He walked.

Lets go still further. What did this walking, talking creature eat before he was cursed? We don’t know, but evidently it wasn’t

“dust” I that only became his diet afterward. As the snake was originally created, he seems meant to dine on something more appealing.

And what about the intelligence level of this creature? The Torah is clear about that The snake, according to the text, was pretty bright: “And the snake was more cunning than any beast of the field” (Genesis 3:1).

So let’s add it all up. The snake walks. The snake talks. He likes good food. He is intelligent What does he remind you of?

I don’t know about you, but he reminds me of a human be­ing. jg

Indeed, the snake so closely resembles a human that he forces us to ask: what, in the end, makes him a snake and not a human? This question hits close to home, because it’s really a question about us and the nature of our humanity. Bottom line: what makes us human and not a snake? If you walk, talk and are smart, are you then a person? Or can you still be a snake?

The snake forces us to ask: where is the essential dividing line between human and animal?

A Curious Temptation

But the mystery of the serpent does not end there. What else is strange about how the Torah portrays him in the story?

Well, there is what this talking snake actually says. Remember, the Torah describes the snake as a smart operator, very “cunning.” So pretend, for a moment, that you were the snake, and you were very smart, and you wanted to coax Eve into eating some fruit she shouldn’t be eating. How would you go about it?

Maybe you’d tell Eve how delicious the fruit looks. Maybe you’d craft a seductive lie about its mysterious powers. Maybe, like the Evil Queen in Snow White, you’d just show up at her doorstep with a shiny apple.

But let’s see what the snake actually does. He approaches Eve, and, in the original Jiebrew, says the following words: “ufiti amar elokim lo tochlu mikol etz hagan'.' Most translations render these

words: “Did God really say thatyou jmay uoLeat from any pfjthe trees of the Garden?” (Genesis v.ih

But that’s not a precise translation of the Hebrew. A better. more hteral translation would read: “Even if Go.d said dojaQteat from any of the trees of the Garden...”

Well, its no wonder that most translations take liberties with the Hebrew; the basic, literal translation of these words is quite strange, to say the least. First of all, the sentence has no ending. It just trails off into nothingness, as if the snake, wereinterrupted be­fore he could get to the punch-line- But even if we help the snake finish his thought, his words are hardly more understandable. Bor what he seems to be telling Eve is: “Even if God said don’t eat from any trees of the Garden, so what? Do it anyway!”

One second. The best possible argument the snake could come up with was: “Even if God said don’t do it, so what?” That doesn’t seem very cunning, does it? Of all things, why choose to remind Eve that she’s not supposed to eat the fruit? WhyfUppantly suggest that she disregard hex Creator’s command?-Remember: to Eve, God is not just some abstract concept. God is real; God quite literally created her. What kind of argument is: “Even if God said no, so what?”

To Be As God

Continue reading, and the snake’s argument takes another in­teresting twist. Let’s listen in as the snake suggests to Eve that he knows the real reason God forbade her and Adam to eat the fruit: “Really, God knows that on the day that you eat from it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis $>$).

Ponder this for a moment, and then ask yourself: is the snake lying or telling the truth? I don’t know about you, but at first blush, it sure seemed to me that he was lying. I could hear my mind work: What kind of preposterous nonsense is it to suggest that God is jealously guarding the '1 ree of Knowledge because it holds the key to being godly ? 11 God really so territorial, worried that lowly

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humans, by virtue of eating some fruit, would magically become just like Him and encroach upon His heavenly realm? Please. The snake must be lying.

But theres np .reason to philosophize about it The textjisglf reveals to us whether the snake was lying or telling the truth. The verse I’m thinking of appears after Adam and Eve have eaten the Forbidden Fruit. Reflecting on their failure, God declares to Him­self that mankind must now be banished entirely from the Garden. And here’s the reasonwhy:“God said, ‘Man has now become like one of us in knowing good and eviL Now he must be prevented from putting forth his hand and also taking from the Tree of Life. He [can] eat it and live forever!’” (3:22).

AsJmpossible as it seems, the snakgjwas ieUiog the truth after all. It’s black on white. God clearly states that the fruit has somehow elevated Adam and Eve to become “like” Him, as they are now “knowers of good and evil.” But how could it be? If the Tree of Knowledge really does make one godly, wouldn’t the Al­mighty want us to have it? It seems pretty blasphemous to sug­gest that God was afraid of competition from the creatures He Himself created.

Finally, as if this statement of God were not already per­plexing enough, there’s one last thing thati.odd about jt^ Listen to how, in this verse, God defines what it means to be a divine being: “Man has now become, like one of(us, knowing good.and evil” (Genesi&3:22).

Ask ten people on the street for a one-sentence definition of God. You’ll probably hear that God is All-powerful. That God is All-knowing. That God is One. Or that God is the Creator. Would anyone tell you that being God means “knowinggood and evil”?

But t hats precisely what the Almighty Himself says.

The snake - this walking, talking representative of the animal world - is right, God Himself confirms the snake’s words. Being godly means knowing good and evil. Now it is up to us to find out what both God and the snake meant.

I Chapter Four

**The Naked Truth**

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he entire story of Adam and Eve in the Garden is no more than twenty-five verses long. That’s a pretty small amount of space in which to tell a story that changed the course of human history. The Encyclopedia Britannica would have devoted dozens of pages to an event of such magnitude. How can the Torah com­municate anything really profound in so few words?

One way the Torah communicates so\_concisely is by creating more than one layer of meaning in its narrative. Twenty-five verses may not sound like a lot, but its plenty if the text is somehow lay­ered, encoded so that it contains meaning far out of proportion to its size, Jewish tradition has long understood that the Torah employs various techniques to help it encode meaning. One of those techniques is a device that’s come to be known as the lead­ing word [milah hamanchah].

Every once in a while, when you are reading a biblical nar­rative, you will find that the text seems to go out of its way to use a certain word, phrase or idea, consistently and repetitively throughout a story. When this happens, it often indicates that this repetitive element holds a key to the meaning of the narrative. The

word or idea in question leads the reader, as it were, to a richer and deeper understanding of the text.

It just so happens thatthe story of Adam and Eve in the Gar­den contains such a repetitive word. If you take a quick break to scan the story yourself, you may well find it.

It is the Hebrew word arom, “nakedness.”

The Strange Prominence of Nakedness Nakedness appearsjeyerywhere throughout our story. It appears at the beginning, just before the snake tempts Adam and Eve: “And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and they were not ashamed” (Genesis, 2:24). It appears at the end, when God makes dothes for Adam and Eve so that they are no longer naked (Genesis, 3:21). And it appears right in the middle of the story, at its turning point, when husband and wife eat the Forbidden Fruit: “And the eyes of both of them were open and they knew that they were naked” (Genesis, 3:11).

Strange, isn’t it? If someone asked you to imagine how eat­ing a fruit that imparts “knowledge of good and evil” would af­fect mankind, what would you have said ? Perhaps Adam and Eve would become instantly aware of a whole new world of moral di­lemmas lying before them: the Right to Life vs. Right to Choice; or: ten people are in a lifeboat and the whole boat sinks unless you throw someone off; what should you do? There are all sorts of such dilemmas. Their heads would be spinning with possibilities.

But no, none of that preoccupied Adam and Eve. When they ate from the Tree of Knowledge, the immediate effect was: they knew that they were naked. It seems odd. Why does kq^yang “gpod and evil” affect our perception of nakedness? Whatever the expla­nation, there is no denying that nakedness is central to the story.

Let’s continue reading the text. Adam eats from the tree and immediately hides from God. Why is he hiding?

Before looking at the reason given in the text - under the circumstances, why do you think Adam would hide? Imagine that some industrious cnn reporter has managed to spot Adam hid­ing behind a bush and gotten an exclusive interview with him. He asks Adam a basic question; “I see you are crouching here behind this bush; you seem to be hiding from God. Can you explain to our viewers why?” if you were in Adams shoes, what you say in reply?

You probably would tell the reporter that you are embarrassed because of what you have done. Here you are, placed in Paradise, with the whole Garden available to you for your enjoyment One little thing God has asked of you - not to eat from a certain tree. And then you had to go and eat from it! You feel filled with shame; you’ve disappointed your Creator and can’t bear to face Him. If you are hiding, one would think that this would be the reason why.

But the text tells us something else. When God asked Adam why he was hiding, this was his reply: “I heard your voice in the Garden, and I hid because I was naked

Somehow, Adam’s consciousness of being naked was jp profound, so disturbing to him, that it trumped even his sense gf shame at having disobeyed the one command ofMs Maker. Why is nakedness so important to this story? Why is humanity’s real­ization of it the one natural consequence of eating from a Tree of Knowledge? And why would this realization be so disturbing that it is the only reason Adam can think.of to explain why he is hiding?

In order to answer these questions, we need to realize that we haven’t yet seen.the.end of nakedness in. this .story It actually makes one more hidden appearance. Believe it or not, there’s one more creature in the Garden that’s naked, and he may hold the kev we have been seeking. Can you spot him?

A Phantom Nakedness

If you had trouble identifying the phantom nakedness.ip out story, it was probably because you were reading the story in English. As it happens, most English translations, almost without exception, conceal the missing occurrence of nakedness. They usually ren­der the telltale verses something like this: “And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and they were not ashamed. Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field..(Gen- edsoi^jčrS:iJl

As you read these words, you surely noticed that Adam and Eve were described as unclothed. But you probably didn’t observe anyone else described the same way. Now trust me on this one. You didn’t see it because you were reading the words in English. Try reading the verses now, when we substitute the Hebrew word for “naked” - arom - in place of its English counterpart:

And they were both arom, the man and his wife, and they were not ashamed.

Now the serpent was more arom thananybeast of the

fieWL.

i; (Genesis, 2:25-3:1).

One second. The snake is arom. too? Absolutely. Immediately after the Torah describes Adam and Eve as naked, the Torah uses the exact same Hebrew term to describe the snake. It just so hap- pens that arom can mean not just naked, but cunning, too.

Well, what are we to make of this? In its simple meaning, the text is telling us about the crafty intentions of the snake - that he is cunning, sly and deceitful. But it hardly seems a coincidence the Torah picked this particular word - arom - to describe the snake’s devious intentions. The Torah goes out of its way to attach this very key word in the story to the cunning snake.

The mystery deepens when we ask: Are the two meanings of arom - “naked” and “cunning” - related conceptually јд any way? Are these apples and elephants, two entirely unrelated ideas, or do they have some essential connection?

At first glance, the ideas “naked” and “cunning” don’t seem to have much in common. But on reflection, they dp seem related in a curious way. Mull the terms over - “naked and cunning, naked and cunning...” - what comes to mind?

These words just happen to be opposites of one another.

When someone is naked, unclothed, there is no hiding. That person’s self is laid bare for all to see. “What you see is what you get.” On the other hand, when one is cunning, he is sly and de- vious; he “cloaks” his true intentions and hides behind a facade His true self is not seen.

Fascinating; the two meanings of arom are mirror images of each other.

All this adds another dimension to our question: why would the Torah take a word it uses over and over again to mean “naked” and then, when describing the snake, twist that word’s meaning to convey the very opposite idea - “cunning”?

Could the Torah be suggesting that - yes, the snake was, of course, cunning but, somehow, he was not just cunning - he was naked as well? What could this mean?

An Innocent Deception

Biologically, of course, a snake really is naked, ft is a reptile, a creature that, unlike most other members of the animal kingdom, lacks fur or hair to cover it But if we think beyond biology, what would it mean for the snake to be not just cunning, but naked?

; If “naked” really is the opposite of “cunning” then ft follows that the snake had both opposing qualities: he possessed both honesty and stealth. In other words, the snake really is deceptive; but, on another, perhaps deeper, level, he’s very straightforward. It all depends how you look at him. From one perspective, what he’s saying doesn’t really apply to Adam and Eve, so his words are deceptive to them. But from another perspective, “what yon see is what you get.” He’s just telling it like if is - from a snakyc point of view, of course.

It happens that this perspective fits like a glove with a number of Other dues scattered throughout our story. But we’re getting ahead 0f ourselves, for we are not quite done yet exploring the snake’s crafty disposition. There’s one more important question we haven’t asked yet: What’s.in itfot the snake?

^ Chapter Five

What's In It for the Snake?

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he Torah describes the snake as being sly or devious. But whenever we talk about someone acting slyly or deviously, we always mean that they are sly and devious in pursuit of some maL With the snake, that piece of the puzzle is missing. We know that he is sly, but that is all the text says about him. We have no due what his motive for the crime might be. To put it succinctly: “What’s in it for the snake?”

Perhaps the Torah doesn’t reveal the snake’s motivation be­cause it is obvious. In other words, perhaps the snake’s motivation is there for all to see - if we just take the time to view his tempta­tion in context. That is, the serpent doesn’t come out of nowhere with his offer of fruit to Eve. There is a history to his offer. Dis­cerning that history is §. key to understanding not just the snake, but the story of the Forbidden Fruit as a whole.

Where Does Our Story Begin?

Most of us think that the story of the Forbidden Fruit begins in chapter three, when the serpent shows up, engages Eve in con­versation, and tempts her to eat what she shouldn’t be eating. But, in truth, that’s not the beginning of the story. The story actually

begins a bit earlier, when the Tree of Knowledge is first introduced andthe command to avoid it is first given:

Out of the ground God caused to grow every tree pleasant to the sight and good for food; the Tree of Life in the middle of the Garden, and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (2:9). And the Lord God commanded Adam, saying ‘Of ev­en' tree of the Garden you may eat freely. But of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil you shall not eat...’ (2:16-17).

ft's easy to miss the fact that the story actually begins in the prior chapter, because following the introduction of the two trees, the text inexplicably digresses. After we first hear of the two frees. God declares that “it is not good for man to be alpne^ and the Almighty then sets about trying to find a helpmate for him. The Almightv creates all the beasts of the field and parades them before Adam, who names all the creatures but has no success finding a mate among them. Finally, the Lord puts Adam to sleep and takes a rib from him, out of which God builds Eve. And only then, after the text tells us about the creation of both Eve and the animals, does the story return to the Forbidden Fruit. Our familiar snake comes along, offers the fruit to Eve, and the rest is history.

AS in all, its a strange path for the text to take. Why 4ge& Adams search for .a mate interrupt the story about the Tree of Knowledge? It would seem more logical to get the creation of Eve and the animals out of the way first, and then begin talking about the Tree of Knowledge; that way, the narrator could bring each story to 1U conclusion without interruption. But for some reason, the Torah doesn’t do it this way. ft places the creation of the am malt and Eve right in the middle of the Tree of Knowledge narrative Why?

Let’s begm by examining tins “digression" a little more closely. The truth is, the story it tells is quite bizarre in its own right. Put yourself, for a moment, in the “shoes" of the Almighty, Imagine that you had created Adam and were then concerned that he not

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be ail alone. You decide he needs a helpmate. What’s the next thing you would do?

You’d probably decide to create Eve

But that’s not what happens. Instead, the Almighty creates all the beasts of the field and brings them before Adam to see if he will find an appropriate mate among them. One by one. Adam rejects them. During that effort, Adam names each of the animals. Now, let’s stop a minute to ask: Why, exactly, did God perform this little experiment? Are we to believe that God, the Great Match­maker in the Sky, couldn’t figure out that a zebra wouldn’t be a good match for Adam? And after the zebra didn’t work out as a wife, was it really necessary to try the hippopotamus and the fla­mingo also? Why is this odd episode told, and why does it inter­rupt the story of the tree?

Maybe the Digression Is Really Part of the Story The combined weight of these questions suggests that we may have been too hasty in classifying God’s attempt to find a mate for Adam as a digression. Perhaps this thread is not an interruption of the Tree of Knowledge narrative at all. Instead, I’d like to suggest that the creation.of thebeasts ofthe field - and Adams rejection of them - is actually crucial to the entire Forbidden Fruit narra­tive, In particular, I am going to argue that it is utterly impossible to understand the snake and his temptation without all this.

We were puzzled earlier about the snake's motive. He is cun­ning, but to what end? Well, perhaps the Torah doesn't talk about the snake’s motivation because it’s clear from the context The dis­cussion of possible companions for Adam, I would suggest, pro­vides the missing motive for the snake. In other words, perhaps it was Adam's rejection of the animals in favor of Eve that propelled the snake into action,

Remember how God had brought all the beasts of the field - c}iuyul hasadeh, as the verse calls them - before Adam to see if he could find a mate among them? It turns out that chayat hasadeh is a relatively rare phrase, It appears in only one other context in the

entire Book of Genesis - in Ле description of the snake.. When we first meet this primal serpent, the Torah describes thgjgreature as “more cunning than all the beasts af the field [chayat hasadeh].”

This phrase may be the clue to what drives this walking, talking serpent. As the representative of the animal world that is closest, as it were, to Adam, the snake was attempting to succeed where all other animals had failed. All the other chayat hasadeh had been unsuccessful in providing companionship for. Adam. The snake, however, was more cunning than those chayat hasadeh: he was seeking to convince the human that at least one beast of the field would be a fitting companion, after all.

A fascinating and perplexing ancient midrashic text seems to suggest precisely this. The Sages of the Midrash were puzzled, as we were, with the missing motivation of the serpent. What drives him? Their answer is shocking. They say that the snake was on an assassination mission. Knowing that the Forbidden Fruit harbored the promise of death, the snake hoped that Eve would pass the fruit to Adam before partaking herself. Why? Because according to the Midrash, the snake wanted to assassinate Adam and marry Eve (Bereishit Rabbah, 18:6, as cited by Rashi to 3:1).

At face value, the Midrash seems preposterous. “Assassinate Adam and marry Eve? What would the children look like?” you protest. But let me offer a quick word to the wise: the Midrash frequently speaks in the language of allegory, and it intentionally cloaks its message in metaphoric garb,. Traditional commentators from Luzzatto to Maharal have rarely taken the statements of the Mid rash literally. The sages often convey deep truths through the my\*UTiUUi, allegorical garb of Mid rash.

Perhaps this particular midrashic teaching is trying to lead us toward the very conclusion we have gingeyly been approach­ing ourselves - namely, that the snake's offer results from Adam’s choice to reject the animals in favor of Eve. in consequence of that refection, the animal world - with the snake as Its represen­tative leveled a challenge to the first humans: “What makes you so special? What makes уџи so different from us that you stand

alone and require one another as mates? We can be your soul­mates, too...”

It Is Not Good for Man to Be Alone Let’s explore this notion a bit further. The Almighty had given Adam dominion over the animal world. As such, Adam had been set apart from that world in a very fundamental way The human was atop Creation but was all alone in this powerful and domi­nating position: “And then God said: It is not good for man to be alone. I will make him a helpmate to join with him.”

Isolated, in charge of a vast world of nature, Adam sees him­self as different, in some fundamental way, from every other crea­ture around him. He is a ruler, yes - but a ruler who is not hilly kindred with his subjects. He is alone. The temptation ofloneliness is to seek solace where it ought not to be sought For Adam, this Would mean seeking companionship among the animals, preti>n fl­ing, if only he could, that he is one of than.

The animal world, for its part, might be seen as only too happy to oblige. If animals could think rational thoughts, if we could anthropomorphize the perspective of the animal world, what opinions might they have about our dominion over them? If animals could challenge our right to dominate, how would they do so?

The implicit challenge of the animal world is: “Are you really so different from us, that you stand above us? At your core, aren’t you really one of us?” And it’s not just a question that animals might ask. It’s a question we could all ask ourselves, every time we exert control over an animal - every lime we harness an ox to a plow or saddle up a horse to ride upon: “Who am I to do this? Am I really so different?”

snake gives a smog to thg§g doubts “Art you really so sure you needl a human as a companion?” it whispers. “Whymot choose a soul-m^e from ow world?" Earlier I asked facetiously what the children of such a union might look like. But that’s pre­cisely the point. They would be “snake-people.” The snake would

have co-opted the world of humans and made it part and parcel of the animal kingdom.

The Almighty, however, gave Adam a chance to experience how futile it would be to find real companionship in the animal world. It wasn’t God but Adam who needed to be shown this. In allowing Adam to name and search for a mate among the animals, God was seeking to inoculate humanity from the temptation it would soon face, to convince Adam through experience that he could neyerreaUybe one with the animal world. Only after such a trial could Adam truly appreciate the unique compatibility of Eve I “a bone from my bones; flesh from my flesh” (2:23). And only after Adam’s trial is humanity ready for the challenge of the serpent: “Aren’t you one of us?”

All of this brings us back to a question we entertained earlier, a question we’ve not yet answered squarely: “What, really, is the dividing line between human and animal?” The very existence of the snake raises this issue. The primal serpent walks. He talks. And he’s clever. So in what sense is he really a snake and not a human? Why couldn’t he be a fitting mate for Eve, after all?

The real answer to this question, I think, lies buried in the heart of our story. Let’s try to unearth it.

**%** Chapter Six

Beauty and the Beast

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ће snakes challenge to Eve is critical for discovering the es­sential difference between snake and human. We asked ear­lier about the strangeness of the snakes opening words to Eve; “Even if God said not to eat from any trees of the Garden..From there, the sentence trails off into nothingness, as if the snake were interrupted before he could finish the thought But lets try to re­construct the end of the sentence. The snake seems to be saying; “Even if God said don’t eat, so what? Do it anywayF Okay, stop the tape - lets look at this: where, exactly, is the temptation here?

I’d like to share with you an approach proposed by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, a giant of biblical exegesis, who lived a little over a century ago. Hirsch suggested that understanding the snake’s words is a matter of emphasis; or, to put it another way, it is a matter of where one puts italics in the sentence. Above, we read the verse as: “Even if God said don’t eat, so what?” Hirsch asked, “What if we read it differently, with the emphasis placed on the word said?”

The sentence sounds a whole lot different now; “Even if God said don’t eat, so what?” Read this way, the snake isn’t really chal­lenging the authority of God, per se. His argument is much more limited; he’s just saying that Gods spoken words are not the things you should pay attention to. To paraphrase Hirsch, the snake would be saying something like the following:

God may have said to avoid the tree, but the question is: ‘Do you want to eat from the tree? Do you desirgJt?’ And let's say you do desire the tree. Where do you think those desires came from? Who put them inside you? Wasn’t God the one who put them inside you? Certainly He did.... He is your Maker.

All in all, the snake is pointing to a great and terrible contra­diction. On the one hand, God’s voice instructs you not to eat of the tree. But on the other hand, another voice of God - His voice inside you; your passions, your desires - beckons you indeed to eat of the tree.

So, to which voice should you listen - the voice of Godihat; comes to you in words, or the voice of God that pulses inside' you, that animates your very being? Which divine voice is more ; primary?

“I don’t know about you,” the snake says, “but, if I were in your shoes, here’s how I would see it. Even if God said don’t eat of the trees, to what? It’s not the voice that speaks to you in words that’s primary. It’s the voice inside you that’s primary!”

The Naked Snake

In saying this, the snake is not necessarily being malicious or even devious. On the contrary, he can be seen as very innocent, very straightforward - very naked. After all, he’s just telling you what it's like to be a snake,

Consider this: How does God make His Will known to a snake? How, for that matter, does (jod make His Will known to any animal? ihe Almighty doesn’t instruct animals intellectu­ally, doesn’t speak to them m words. There is no Bible, no Torah, revealed atop a mountain for snakes, birds, and lizards. But just

because a snake doesn’t have a law book doesn't mean no laws ex­ist for him. To the contrary, animals follow the Divine Will quite faithfully. The voice of God beats palpably inside of them. God speaks to animals through the passions, desires, and instincts they find within themselves. Every time a grizzly bear goes salmon hunting in an Alaskan river; every time worker bees chase the drones out of a hive - every tjmp an animal acts "naturally” obey­ing the voice of instinct or desire within itself - the animal fallows the Will of its Creator,

'60 for the snake, the way out of the apparent contradiction is quite clear: “Even if God said don’t eat from the tree, so what?\*11 • The real voice of God is not to be found in words. The real voice I of God doesn’t speak to you from the outside, it pulses insistently i within you.i

And that is the essential temptation.pf the .serpent It is a temptation that cuts to the core of our humanity. Remember how we asked before: Why is it that the snake could never be a fitting companion for Adam? How is humanity fundamentally different from the snake, or, for that matter, from any member of the ani­mal world? Well, let’s try and tackle that now.

Does our uniqueness as humans lie in the fact that we can talk? Perhaps. But if we met a talking animal, would we grant it hu­man rights? Lately, researchers have taught limited sign language to apes. Would these apes qualify as furry humans?

Maybe our advanced intelligence is what makes us human. But what if we met a really smart animal? As I understand it, the jury is still out on the intelligence of dolphins. If dolphins really are as bright as some claim, should they be entitled to the right to vote?

Well, then, if the key to our humanity doesn’t lie in our capac­ity for speech, for walking on two legs, or for intelligent thinking - all of which were shared by our friend, the primal serpent - in what does our humanity lie? I would argue that it lies in how you answer this one query: “How does God speak to you? \Vhich is the primary voice of God?"

If God speaks to you primarily through passion and instinct; if all you need to do is examineyourdesires to find out what God wanti^of you; if your essential self is easily and naturally „identi­fied with your passions - well, you are an animal. If you are able to stand outside your passion? and examine them critically; if desire is something you have, not something уоц are\ if God ad­dresses. Himself to your mind and asks you to rise above your desiresj. or to channel them constructively - well, then you are a human.

What the snake is really doing, then, is forcing Adam and Eve to confront what it means for them to be human beings and not beasts. In the end, the snake really is “arom” in both senses of the word. When he asks, “Even if God said don’t eat, so what?” he is being straightforward and honest - naked, as it were. He is just telling it like it is: “Here’s what it is like to be a snake.”>Onthe other hand, when we look at the snake’s wordsifomowr point of view, namely from the perspective of Adam and Eye, then his ar­gument looks cunning and deceptive, the other meaning of^arom.” Whats right for the snake is not necessarily right for us. He may walk; he may talk; he may be smart - but we are different from him; we hear a voice that is not relevant to him. When all is said and done, we are more than the sum total of our instipcts or pas­sions, We are not snakes.

Beauty and the Beast

Before making her decision to take the fruit, Eve contemplated the choice before her. According to the text, here is what happened: “And the woman saw that the tree was good to eat, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable as a means to wisdom” (Genesis, 3:6).

That, at least, is how most translations render the verses; and, indeed, it is how some commentators interpret them, But the Hebrew indicates otherwise. Д more literal translatioriofthe last phrase, venechmud haletz lehaskil, yields not that the tree was

“*desirable as a means to wisdom”* but that it was “*desirable to* con- template” (,Gejxesis.3:ti),

“Desirable to contemplate” - it’s a strange phrase, and maybe that’s why many translations shun it. What does it mean; what kinds of things are desirable to contemplate? For that matter; how does this last phrase fit with the first two? Are the three phrases - “good to eat”/ “delight to the eves”/ “desirable to contemplate” - all related somehow?

I think they are. All three describe how the tree appealed to Eve aesthetically - at the level of beauty; on more precisely, at the level of desire. Each description portrays in what way the fruit was “desirable.” Each description is more sophisticated, more subtle than the last.

To explain: A lollipop tastes “good to eat.” Even a two-year- old child can appreciate that. But it takes a ten-year-old to appre­ciate the beauty of a rose - beauty that is “a delight to the eyes,” not to the mouth. And what about things that are “desirable to contemplate”? This is beauty that appeals not to any of our physi­cal senses, but to our mind. The poems of Emily Dickinson, the symphonies of Beethoven, an elegant debating performance - all these are “desirable to contemplate.” They appeal to the mind, yes, but not because they are true - rather, because they are beautiful. Indeed, a poem may or may not express a truth, and a good de- bater can be impressive even if he’s lying through his teeth. But that’s irrelevant. The mind appreciates the beauty of such things - and desires them accordingly.

The tree appealed to Eve at all aesthetic levels from the most obvious to the most subtle and refined. The fruit of the tree was dripping with allure. “Even if God said don’t eat, so what?”

You Are What You Eat

The snake’s challenge to eat the Forbidden Fruit followed natu­rally from his belief that the voice of desire is the primary way God speaks to us, that desire and instinct are more trustworthy

indicators of God’s Will than God’s words. From his perspective, the snake’s argument is very natural, very innocent: tree, Eve, internalize your desires, find your center in theip. aqd ушјхшштју be godly”

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But what, you ask, does all lids have to do with "knowing good and evil”? Why would a battle over the proper role of desire in the human psyche be waged over a tree that contains, of aUlhings, “knowledge of good and evil”?

Hang on. We’ll explore that next.

^ Chapter Seven

A World of Broccoli and Pizza

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he time has come to examine more carefully the centerpiece our story, the “Tree of Knowledge.” Doing so, however, is no easy task. The tree isn’t around anymore, and even if it were, we probably couldn’t understand it by taking sap samples from its trunk or by measuring the biochemical qualities of its fruit But while the tree itself is pone, the Hebrew words that dpsrrihe its characteristics are alive and well And these, I think, hold some important cluesf The forbidden tree is known in Hebrew as Etz HaDa’at Tpv Vara.. The conventional translation of the phrase is “knowledge of good and evil.” Let’s explore what the name really means.

What Is Real Knowledge Made Of?

We’ll start with the first phrase daaty routinely, translated as “knowledge.” The meaning of this word'however, is not limited tp conventional knowledge. Indeed, one of the first times in Gen­esis this Hebrew root appears, it conveys an experience that, at first blush, few of us would call “knowledge” at all:

*V’haada*m ya*da et chavah ishto.*..

And the man knew his wife... (Genesis 4:1).

In the Bible, the word daat doubles as a synonym for sexual intimacy. The Torahs use of this word for both “knowledge” and “sexual union” is no doubt significant. More than likely, there is a core understanding of “daat” that gives rise to both these mean­ings. What would that core be about?

Lets approach it this way: When a man “knows” his wife, what is he really seeking? Cynics might reply that he’s after nothing but pleasure. But beyond sheer physical pleasure - gpa heynnrl procreation - is there not something more, something deeper, that he seeks? Perhaps, on some level, he is indeed after “knowl­edge” - knowledge of the mysterious, alluring feminine that is so different from him, hut so much a “missing part” of him at the same time. To be sure, j£ is not jnteUectuaLknawledgg thgtJie seeks. He is seeking raw, first-hand knowledge. He is seeking tn experience the feminine in a direct, unfiltered wav.

In the branch of philosophy known as epistemology, a long­standing debate has raged about what real “knowledge” consists of Rationalists have argued that “head knowledge” reigns su­preme. You know something is true when vou can demonstrate it through logic or analysis. Other philosophers, however, have asserted that real knowledge is only gained by experience. It’s all very nice to contemplate an idea in your head, they contend, but you only know its real when it happens in the real world; when you demonstrate it, say, in a laboratory. If vou see it, if you feel it, if you experience it - then you Jgxow it’s real.

Daat seems to denote this latter kind of knowledge - know­ing something by experiencing it. A scientist who performs an experiment attains daat, even though he can’t yet explain the ra­tionale behind what he has experienced. A man attains da’at of a woman by joining with her and experiencing hen even though be can’t express in words her mysterious essence. And human­kind attains daat of good and\_eviLnpt by inteJJectuaJizing about

morality and what it is made of - but by experiencing “goodand evil” in a raw, direct way.

To summarize, then, in attaining “knowledge” of good and evil, humanity didn’t gain a better intellectual understanding of right and wrong. We gained an experiential understanding nf these things. We began tn Icnnw right and wrong from the “in­side.”

But what, exactly, does that mean? It sounds so abstract What does it mean to know “good and evil” in a raw experien­tial kind of way? I understand what it means to know ice cream experientially and from the inside. I go to Baskin and Bobbins, order some “Pralines n Cream” on a cone, and eat it - then Vwe gotmy “da’at” ofice cream. But what does it mean to know “good and evil” in this way? How does one take “good and eviT inside ofoneself?

A closer look at the words “good and evil” (tov and ra) wifl help us find answers to our questions.

Right and Wrong from the Inside Out In chapter one, I alluded to Maimonides’ view of our story. In his Guide to the Perplexed, Maimonides suggested that Adam and Eve were already aware of right and wrong, in some fashion, before eating from the tree. According to Maimonides, the tree did not give them moral awareness where they had none before. Rather, it transformed this awareness from one kind into another. Before eating from the tree, they would not have called virtuous moral choices “good” and vile choices “evil.” They would have had a dif­ferent way of thinking about such things and would have used different words to describe them.

What were these “other words,” this original way of looking at things? Well, according to Maimonides, in the pre-Tree world - in the more pristine world - virtuous choices would have been called “true,” and reprehensible choices would have been labeled “false.”

In short, doing the right thing was called “truth”; and doing die wrong thing was called “falsehood.”

What does Maimonides mean by this? At first glance, his explanation doesnt appear to clarify anything. The word “false” seems to describe “2+2=5” a lot better than, say, robbing a bank. What does it mean to see morality as a set of choices between “truth and falsehood”? And how does this differ from saying that morality means choosing between “good and evil”?

I don’t know for sine, and Maimonides doesn’t elaborate all that much on what he means by this. But I have a theory. Let’s try thinking of it in these terms:

How are “true” things different from “good” things? When I say something is true, I’m describing obiective realitv. I’m telling you that something is out there; it’s reaL And it’s real whether I like it or not If morality is a matter of true and false, thismeans that making moral choices involves discerning something\_obiec- tive. It involves figuring nnf what thp^right-thing-to-do-is—what my Maker expects of me^jrnd then trying to align mvfoehavior with that “trudi,” whether I like it or not.

How, then, do we see virtue d \ ffprently-w.hen..we,ca1Li tJ^gand” rather than “ime”? While the word “true” has a core meaning of “real,” die word “good” is not quite as objective a term, lor example, what else does “good” mean besides “that which is ethically cor- rectj? Its other meaning is: “that which is pleasing.” When I say that something is good, what I am really telling vou. in a subde way, is that I approve of it, that it is desirable [[2]](#footnote-2)

Perhaps, then, Maimonides means the following: The shift from a world of true and false to a world ofgood and evil was a shift between a world in which I could stand outside my desire to look at choices objectively to a world in which J was gonfined to

see things through desire's eyes. In the pre-Tree world, desire did not intrude on the terrain of the intellect. I could discern dearly whatjGqdwanted, agd! ..

cloud that vision. i could see what was “true” and choose it, or \* disregard it in favor of what I personally wanted to do. If I would choose the latter, I would at least know that I chose my desire over the “true”. In the nost-Tree worltL that clarity is lost Mydesirein- trudes and becomes an .inescapable part of the moral x^cuhis

As we mentioned earlier, the Tree of Knowledge was deeply Associated with desire. It appealed to Eve at all conceivable aes­thetic levels, from the most base (taste) to the most profound (mind). Iht-hemivsterious Tree of Knowledge was really a tree jgf desire\* then to eat from it was literally to bring desire inside my- self:rtoldentifv withal Whereas previously, desire was something outside of. mv sense of self, something I possessed, now I could delude myself into thinking that desire was something I am.

Eating from the tree meant a change in equilibrium. In the pre-Tree world, desire was a natural part of humans, but it was recognizable as a mere part of who we were, and that part was in equilibrium with the rest of us. It was less likely to blind-side us. In the post-Tree world, that balance can no longer be taken for granted. It becomes a center of gravity: it is always a force to be reckoned with. It becomes a lens through which I view things. No longer do I see a clear world of “true” and “false”; now I see something that is ever so slightly different I see “good” and “evil” - terms that blur the distinction between virtue and desire.

A World of Broccoli and Pizza

If this still seems a little abstract, let's examine some more com­monplace ways in which we use these words, “true” and “false” as well as “good” and “evil.” If we pay careful attention to these phrases, we’ll hear some echoes of Maimonides’ understanding of matters.

To begin with, when we shoot an arrow that hits its mark, we sometimes speak of the arrow having flown “true” to its tar-

get Conversely, the Hebrew word chef (sin) signifies “having shot at a target and missed” (e.g. fudges 20:16). In effect, when moral decisions are choices between truth and falsehood, it follows that I am trying to “hit a target” when I make these decisions. I am trying to discern my Creators expectations for me and I am try­ing to act accordingly. To sin is not primarily about hell-fire and guilt. If it is, that part is only secondary. What it’s about primar­ily is “missing the mark” - failing to align myself with the reality called the Will of my Creator.

Now lets look at the other side of the coin. When a kid pushes away a plate of broccoli and says it’s “bad,” when he prefers the pizza because its “good,” he is not dispassionately telling you about the quality and nutritional benefits of the food. He’s telling you what he likes and what he doesn’t like. In a Curious way, he is actually idling you more about himself than he is about the food.

Consequently, when the Torah speaks of “knowing good and evil” it is using shorthand for a new way of looking at moral choices. Yes, I am still trying to figure out what God wants of me - at least overtly. But there’s another factor that can potentially c&oud my vision. It’s not only about what God wants anymore; itjs also about what / want Packed inside eyery moral decision is a tittle bit of pizza and broccoli. My own desires are now an inescap­able part of the picture because now I see each decision through the veil of my desire. I can rise above these desires, but doing so ц not always easy.

in the brave new world of good and evil, what I think is right and worthwhile is not necessarily what really is right and worth­while. That which is merely “good” - desirable to me - cap easily masquerade seif righteously as the “true.” When I am looking at life through the filter of my own subjectivity, I may think that “x” is what God wants - but perhaps it's really just what I want.

Are All Moral Dilemma\* **Created Equal?**

To really get a handle on these ideas, I’d like to take them out of the realm of theory and apply them to real life. Let's try talking

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about “truth and falsehood” and “good and evil” in the context of some moral dilemmas that you and 1 might face during the course of our lives.

Try a thought experiment Below, you’ll find a list of several hypothetical moral dilemmas. Take a blank piece of paper. Put a ding down the middle and mark one side of the line “Column a” and the other side “Column b.” Now see if you can divide the list naturally into two categories. Here are the examples:

\* •. “Is it okay to take a dying man off a respirator?"

elderly mother needs help organizing her house before ■ she moves, but my kid needs me to help him prepare for fi­nals, With whom do I spend the evening?”

“Should Billy lie to the teacher to protect his friend, Bobby, when the teacher asks him whether Bobby was cheating on ms test?”

a dark and rainy night in Manhattan. You throw your trusty Chevy Suburban into reverse and begin to back out of your parking spot, when you hear a sickening thud. You get out of the car to behold, right behind you, a shiny black gyTexus convertible - with a badly dented front end. You look a around. The street is entirely dark, not a soul to be seen. Do you leave a note or not?

The dilemmas do divide naturally into two groups. Three of these dilemmas are real. One of them, though, is fundamentally illusory. Three of the dilemmas exist whether you live in a world of "true and false” or a world of “good and evil" The other exists only in the mixed-up world of “good and eviL" In the world of true and false,” it simply evaporates.

Now, which is which?

I Chapter Eight

A Dark and Rainy Night in Manhattan

O

kay, lets review. Here are our four dilemmas: the dying man and the respirator; your elderly mother and your kids homework; Billy and his teacher; and you and your Subur­ban on a dark Manhattan street.

Well, did you find the impostor?

If you identified the illusory dilemma as the last one - the dark and rainy night in Manhattan - then you and I are on the same page. If you didn’t - well, we can still be friends. But in any case, here’s my thinking:

The first three dilemmas share a certain, basic quality. They are choices between competing ideals. Each ideal is worthy or noble in its own right, mid the dilemma arises only because the two ideals are forced fo compete with one. aDQther.

For example, take our respirator case: Everyone agrees that prolonging a life is a noble goal, and everyone agrees that improv­ing the quality of a life is also noble, but what happens when you are forced to choose between the two? And consider Billy and Bobby: both honesty and loyalty are worth fighting for. But when

each value leads you in a different direction, which one wins out? And so it is with Mom and my son: I have obligations to both these relatives; how do I weigh my competing responsibilities?

All these choices are genuine. There are two boxers in the ring, as it were - two competing values - and the question is: Which boxer wins? Which value is dominant? How does my Cre­ator expect me to act?

But lets turn now to the last case. It’s that dark and rainy night in Manhattan, and am I pondering whether to leave that note. Let’s identify the competing “ideals” here. Well, first we have honesty. Honest)’ says leave the note. Okay, now where’s the counter-argu­ment? Think carefully...

There is none.

One second. If there’s no second ideal, how come it’s such a struggle to figure out what to do? It should be a no-brainer. There’s only one boxer. Shouldn’t he win by forfeit? The answer is: there is indeed another boxer here. But it’s not an ideal. It’s a boxer named desire.

A Boxer Named Desire

In this last dilemma, the battle is being waged between an ideal - honesty - and what you would rather do. The two boxers are sim­ply named: Honesty vs. The Fact that You Don’t Want to Leave the Note.

That, of course, is not how your brain presents things to you, though. No, ma'am. Let’s listen in on our internal dialogue as you inspect the mangled front end of the Lexus and wrestle with your decision:

“You know, 1 really should leave that note.... But, one sec­ond - before I do that, do I really know for sure that I’m the one who made that dent? I mean, sure I heard a noise when I backed up, but maybe I just ran over a soda can in the gutter or something. And I just tapped that Lexus anyway; could I really have made such a big dent?

Boy, I sure would be a sucker if that car was already dented and I left a note. Anyway, what business did he have parking his toy so near my truck? What a fool I’d be to leave him a note. Look, it’s not like he’ll be out any money or any­thing. Heck, his insurance company will pay. That’s what uninsured motorist insurance is for, isn’t it?”

By the time you’re done, you’ve convinced yourself that it would be positively virtuous to walk away. It’s Robin Hood vs. the Big Insurance Corporations; it’s the little guy vs. the rich and arrogant; it’s you vs. your own naivete - why, you wouldn’t be so naive as to think he would leave you a note if he were the one who hit you?

But it’s all a sham. All those extra “boxers” are phantoms. The real name of the sgcood boxer is simply desire.

Welcome to the. worldnf good and evil.

The Mind-Games of Desire A fascinating rabbinic teaching echoes this idea

The Sages state that after a person dies, the Heavenly Court allows him to view his Evil Inclination - his yetzer hara, as it were. The Sages go on to say that if the person was righteous in his life­time, his Evil Inclination appears to him as a mountain, but if he was wicked, it appears to him as a lowly hilL In either case, the person is astonished. The first person is amazed that he managed to surmount the mountain, while the latter is astonished that such a measly hill deterred him.

What do the rabbis mean to say here? At first blush, their teaching is counterintuitive. If anything, one would have expected the reverse. Wasn’t the wicked person tormented by the “moun­tain,” by roiling desires he found impossible to subdue? And wasn’t the righteous person the one with the tamer sense of personal desire, the mere “hill”?

A friend once suggested to me an interesting explanation. Perhaps the difference between a righteous person and a wicked

one is not that one has a greater or more intense yetzer hara than the other; its that, by and large, tjie yricked person succumbed to that yetzer hara, whereas the righteous person didn’t. That fact al­ters what each sees when he looks backward: the righteous person sees desire that has not yet been sated, whereas the wicked person sees what desire looks like after one has given into it.

When desire has yet to be sated, it looks like a mountain. Just before you eat the chocolate macadamia fudge torte, you can’t imagine anything more delicious. But through the rear view mir­ror, desire gives a different appearance. Once you’ve finished off the last crumbs, the mountain is gone, and you see reality for what it really is: the torte tasted good for all of thirty seconds, and now you’ve got two hours ahead of you in the gym to work it off.

Such are the pitfalls of subjectivity. In the post-Tree world of good and evil, a dilemma is born on the rainy streets of Manhattan. Desire, for all its size and power, dwells unseen within each of us. hiding easily behind “phantom boxers^In this world ofisubiectiv- ity, evil can get dressed up in pretty clothes - and when it does, it’s hard to know the difference between that which is truly virtuous ahcT compelling and that which is merely seductive.

The Beginnings of Desire

Like that rainy night in Manhattan, the choice of whether to eat from the tree or not may have seemed to Adam and Eve like a le­gitimate dilemma: which voice of God do I listen to - the desire inside me, or the voice that commands me with words?

It seems like a reasonable enough question. And there were good reasons to ad vocate partaking from this tree of desire. There were good reasons to think it would be right and good and laud­able to bring desire into our lives more powerfully than before. After all, the snake is not altogether wrong about instinct and de­sire constituting the voice of God. Passion does come from Ggd, and experiencing it seems to be an essential part of what makes us human. What would it be like to wake up in the morning with no sense of ambition, or to look at a spectacular sunset without

a sense of yearning? What if great art seemed humdrum; if ro­mance was wooden and unappealing; if poetry failed to stir our souls? We may well ask if life would still be worth living. To some extent, passion is the very stuff of life.

It’s all very reasonable, isn’t it? But like that rainy night in Manhattan, there’s a sub-text to this dilemma. The intellectual arguments mask another agenda. Even as Adam and Eve stoodin the world of true and false, the world of good and evil beckoned to us, and desire began to assert its subtle influence.

I Chapter Nine

The I of the Beholder

S

he astute reader will notice that when Eve tells the snake what God commanded her not to eat, tier paraphrase is differ­ent from what God actually commanded. Some of her changes amounyo outright inaccuracies; others merely shift the emphasis. For example, Eve identifies the tree she and Adam must avoid as being in the “center of the Garden.” However, this wasn’t where the forbidden\_tree. wasreially located.. If you look at the verses care­fully, you’ll find that this is not the only change she makes - there are actually a whole bunch of other ones as well. So, taken as a whole, do these changes suggest a pattern or are they just random misquotations?

Here’s a homework assignment: take out those number two pencils and see if you can make a list of the discrepancies. In what ways did Eve miscommunicate God’s restriction? When you’ve got your list together, ask yourself: why did Eve change these details?

Well, it’s possible, of course, that Eve was the unfortunate victim of a communications failure. She had not been created yet when the original command to avoid the tree was given, and maybe Adam repeated it inaccurately to her. But maybe some­thing else was afoot. Look carefully and see if you think there

is any pattern to the various discrepancies between the original

God’s Original Command:

.of.it, I, for one, think such a pat-

And God caused to grow from the ground all sorts Of trees that were good to look at and good to eat from, and the Tree of Life in the middle of the Garden, and the Tree of Knowl­edge of Good and Evil (2:10).... And the Lord God com­manded Adam saying: “From all the trees you may eat, yes, eat. But from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, do not eat from it, for on the day you eat from it you will surely die” (2:16-17)

Eve’s Paraphrase of that Command:

And the woman said to the serpent: “From the fruit of the trees of the Garden we may eat. But from the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the Garden, God said not to eat from it and not to touch it lest we die.” (3:3-4)

Okay, let’s catalogue the differences. What did you come up with? Here’s my list:

• Location of the Forbidden Tree. Eve says the forbidden tree is in the “middle of the Garden.” In fact, according to verse 2:10, it was only the Tree of Life (which was, never puLoff- limits) that was clearly in “the middle of the Garden”; the whereabouts of the Tree of Knowledge are uncertain.[[3]](#footnote-3)

, Is Touching Against the Rules? Eve tells the serpent that she is forbidden even to touch the Tree of Knowledge. In the original command, it is only eating from the tree that is 'f\* prohibited.

* Fruit vs. Tree. God speaks of a forbidden tree. Eve speaks of .Forbidden Fruit In practice, perhaps, its al the Same, but the emphasis is certainly different
* Is Death a Certainty? God says that if you eat from the tree, you shall surely die. Eve suggests that she and Adam better not eat from the tree “lest” they die. Eve implies a probability

|j^f death, not a certainty.

* When Is Death a Reality? God says that death becomes a reality on the day that you eat from the tree. Eve doesn’t men­tion a time frame.
* “All” the Trees or Not? Using repetitive language, God em- .p'hasizes that Adam and Eve “may eat, yes, eat” from “ah” the trees pf the Garden, except the Tree of Knowledge. When talking about the trees she and Adam may eat, Eve removes d^p^phasized, double language, and also leaves out the word “all.” (She uses the more toned-down phrase: “from the

ф' trees dfethe field we may eat.. .”)

Is There a Pattern Here?

What are we to make of all this? Is there any rhyme or reason be­hind theses discrepancies, anything that might explain why Eve made the changes she did in “explaining” the Almighty’s prohibi­tion? It seems to me that Eve’s changes do add up to something.

One might theorize that Eve deliberately distorted God’s command or that perhaps she misunderstood the command. 1 can't conclusively disprove those theories. But to my thinking, ajhird option seems more likely: namely, that the changes Eve m^jces yrere nqt deliberate at aiL Rather, caught off-guard by the serpent jirid in the heat of the moment, this was just how things МШ to her; ttyis was how she wanted to see them.

In other words, the subtle distortions in Eve’s words do not.

in my opinion, bespeak an intellectual misunderstanding of what God said, bat a wishfol attempt by the mind to recast God’s com­mand in a different light To put it baldly; if eating from the tree marked the beginning of a more profound role for desire in the life of mankind, then this snapshot of a conversation gives us our first case study in the unseen mechanics by which desire can con­found our perception of die way things really are.

Consider this: When we want something that we can’t or shouldn’t have - but we really want it anyway - what are the things we tell ourselves? How, exactly, does desire begin to work its magic? What do we say to start convincing ourselves that it’s really okay for us to have the thing we want? We look at the reality in front of us, and weproceed to delude ourselves by exaggerating certain aspects of it and minimizing others. The game commences, more or less, along the following lines:

* We might begin by exaggerating the extent of the restriction placed upon us, e.g. “even touching the tree is forbidden”. It’s easier to rationalize a wrong if we exaggerate how difficultit is to abide by the rules. How could my parent expect me not to even get near the cookie jar? It’s one thing fiot to eat, but how am I supposed to avoid the entire kitchen?
* Conversely, I might minimize the significance of what I can have. In reality, I may “eat, yes, eat” from “all the trees in the Garden save one. There are thousands of trees that I am en­couraged, maybe even commanded, to partake of. hut.the mind-games ofdesire shift the emphasis: sure, we can eat from trees, but we can’t even touch the one in the middle.
* Then we might trivialize the consequences of transgressing. We won’t die right away, will we? No, God only meant that today we would become mortal - but death itself won’t hap­pen for years and years. Why, of course I should stay away from the tree, but only in case I may eventually die,
* Finally, J might exaggerate the significance of the thing I can’t have. It becomes my focus, the center around, which

my world starts to revolve. Which tree is in the middle of the Garden? For God, the center of the Garden, what occupies His focus, is the Tree of Life - a tree that, surprisingly, was not originally placed off-limits. For Eve, though, the tree she can’t eat from becomes the center. Desire focuses on the for­bidden and magnifies it not because the thing is objectively important, but simply because I can’t have it.

In portraying Eve’s conversation with the serpent the way it does, the Torah seems to be constructing for us a case study in the dynamics of desire. Here is what it looks like, the text seems to be saying, to struggle with the phantom boxer, the boxer named desire. In subtle ways, things can start to look either bigger or smaller than they really are. The implied warning is dear: don’t be too quick to embrace your impeccably constructed arguments about why you really should eat that fruit First, ask yourself Am I seeing things the way they really are or just the way I want to see them? Even if I’m not exactly lying to myself about the facts, am I playing with how I emphasize them? Am I exaggerating the importance of some things while minimizing the significance of others?

The Remaining Puzzle Pieces

Now that we understand the extent to which desire played a role in that very first decision of Adam and Eve, it is possible to inves­tigate how the consequences of that choice made themselves felt How did eating from the tree - even the struggle over whether to eat from it - change Adam and Eve? How has it changed us? To grapple with these issues, we will need to consider the rest of our story, namely, what transpired after Adam and Eve ate the fruit So here’s what happened next: [[4]](#footnote-4)

* Adam answers that he is hiding, for he is afraid because he is naked.
* After dismissing Adam and Eve’s excuses (she told me to do it the snake told me to do it), the Almighty imposes vari­ous punishments on them, including death, exile, difficulty farming, and pain in childbirth.

Earlier, we pointed out the strangeness of these events. But in reality, the obstacles to understanding are even more troubling **than** we let on before. Each and every one of these “post-eating- from-Tree” happenings is, I think, perplexing in its own way Let’s go through them one by one and see how:

* Adam and Eve realize that they are naked and hide from God. Earlier, in Chapter Four, we discussed how odd this emphasis on nakedness seems. Why, of all things, is **this** the cardinal consequence of eating from a tree bearing knowl­edge of good and evil? **After attaining this knowledge, Adam and Eve do not** be**come aware of a whole new realm of moral** di**lemm**as**. Instead, they realise they are naked. Why?**
* God asks Adam where he is. One second. Do you mean to tell me that the **Almight**y couldn’t find **him**? **Why is God** asking a question to whi**ch He already knows the answer?**
* Adam answers that he is hiding for he is afraid because he is naked. **Is that how you would put it if you were Adam**? First of all, it is strange that Adam singles out his naked­ness as the reason he is hiding. If you and I were in Adam’s shoes, we probably would have said we were hiding out of shame that we had disobeyed God**. But for some reason, in** Adams mind, this sense of shame is t**rumpe**d by somet**hing** even more overwhelming - awareness of his o**wn nake**dness. Again, were back to the nakednese theme. Why was this so important to him? Secondly, if you were going to hide be­cause you were naked, what emotion would you pinpoint as the reason you wanted to hide? I don’t know about you, but I

would pick either shame or embarrassment How do we fed when we are naked in public? Embarrassed, **1** would **think.** But, strangely, Adam talks about something else. He says he is afraid because he is naked. W**hy, in Adam’s mind, does his nakedness inspire** not embarrassment hut fear?

• Ihe Almighty imposes various punishments on Adam and **Eve.** Okay, let’s think about these **punishments. We might** e**xpect that** a**n omnistienl and perfectly just God would** i**mpose punis**hments to **fit, in** some **sense, t**he crime. There should be some logical correspondence, some tit-for-tat as it were, between what the people did wrong and the conse­quences they are made to bear. But what **connection** is there between punishment and crime in our story? At face value, it seems almost as if the Almighty reached **into** His celestial grab-bag of consequences and randomly doled outBghlmng- bolts: “Let’s see. Adam? You re the one who works the fields around here. Okay, no more Easy Street for you. Pram now on, you’ll have to work to get harvest out of the land. Eve? Right You’re the one who bears children - lets **make that a** little tougher. And Snake? You’ll crawl on your belly and eat dust, and there will be eternal hatred between your progeny and those of Eve. While were at it - death to everybody; nobody gets to live forever anymore. Oh, and cme **last thing**: Exile! Everybody out of the pool!”

So we have now laid out the last three pieces of Torahs very elaborate puzzle, the stories of Adam and Eve. Tjhese **jhsgss**

**are: God’s strange question.** “Where are you”; Adams intense fo­**cus upon and fear of naked**ness: and th**e Almighty’s** s**eemingly** ran**dom imposition of punishmen**ts. And I think we are, at last, ready to piece the puzzle together.

Having seen the connection of the Forbidden Fruit story to that of Adam’s naming and rejecting the animals; having defined the Forbidden Fruit trial as a challenge to understand why an ani­mal never could be our soul-mate; having seen the way human

desire in the post-Тгее world impedes moral judgment; having seen all this - we are finally in a position, I think, to understand the aftershocks of eating from the tree.

In the final two chapters of Part One, I promise to pull all these threads together. In the meantime, if you’d like to pause and reflect a bit before reading further, you might ask yourself: Are those punishments really as random as they seem? And - given the nature of the tree as we’ve begun to see it - why might fear of nakedness be exactly the response onemight expect from a being who suddenly wakes to find himself inhabiting a, radically\_new work! ofgood aadjadll

**p Chapter Ten**

Friedrich Nietzsche and the Disc Jockey

A

few years ago, Iflipped on the radio while driving in New -York City. A disc jockey on one of the music stations was offering to help love-stricken callers sort out their romantic troubles. Listening for a few minutes, I encountered an exchange between the dj and an earnest young, religious fellow who was explaining why he had chosen to remain sexually abstinent until he was married. The d j debated with him, and, to my surprise, advanced a religious argument - very pious sounding, actually - against the caller. “Tell me,” the host began, “are you a normal fellow? Do you have any desires?”

Silence at the other end of the line.

After a suitable pause, the host continued: “Look, why do you think the Lord placed these desires in you if He didn’t want you to act upon them?”

The poor fellow hadn’t expected to be attacked on religious grounds, and he didn’t have much of an answer. As I drove away, my heart went out to the mismatched caller - and it struck me that the primal snake, after all these years, is still alive and welL His

argument, despitethe passageof time, seems **as** current no**w as i**t ever did “Even if God said don’t eat from the tree. .^so what?”

“Gods commands, whatever they **may b**e, **are not primary**.” asserts the snake. “The real voice of the Divine **whispers tojyou** from theinside, through the desire and passion that He **has in**- stilled in your very being. If your desires were placed inside you by your Creator, then don’t you honor Him by doing their bid­ding?"

Opponents of religion have advanced **this** rather **basic ar**- gument throughout history. **One suc**h attacker was **Friedric**h Nietzsche, a nineteenth-century German philosopher, who, **fit­**tingly enough, entitled a collection of his **essays Beyond Good and** Evil In his writings, Nietzsche railed against organized Western religion. He decried the tendency of religion to shun worldly plea­sures and delights, to avoid them as if they were something to bek feared. Passion, he declared, was the **stuff of life itself.** If one **avoids** passion, if one fails to engage it, one has failed the most **basic test** of humanity. That person has failed to live.

What, really, is the answer to the snake - or, for that blatter, the answer to any modern purveyor of his argument? It’s all very nice to say that passion is for animals and God’s commands are for humans; that animals obey the voice of God inside them and that we obey the voice of God that comes to us through God’s commands - but, as humans, are we **really rea**dy to .consign..,pas­sion to the dust heap? Desire, when yo**u rea**lly think about **it. ha**s much to commend it Passion fires our aesthetic sense. It ma**ke?** us yearn for beauty, reach out for the spectacular sunset, thrill tp tbe sounds of Yo-Yo Mas cello. To some extent, Nietzsche was right; our appreciation of these things, at least in part, is what **makes** ps human. The minute I am devoid of desire, the minute I **have** no ambition left -**1** have no reason to wake up in the morning. I’m as good as dead.

So where, exactly, was the snake wrong?

To really respond to the snake effectively, we need to re-cali- brate our arguments a bit We need to take one last, long look at

desire and see if we really want to dismiss its charms completely. After all, God Himself is passionate, with a Will so powerful that it spontaneously manifests as reality. God desires a universe and, out of nothing, it explodes into being/ What could be wrong, the snake asks, with a little more passion?

Torah and the Spice of Life

A good eighteen centuries ago, the Sages of the Talmud anticipated this line of reasoning, and they put forward a pithy but perplexing aphorism that tries, I think, to respond to it The aphorism was written intiisbrew; here’s how it’s usually translated:

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Israel: “My son, I have - created the Evil Inclination; and I have created the Torah, its antidote. If you involve yourself in the Torah, you will not be delivered into its hands...” (Tractate Kiddushin, 30b).

At first glance, the Sages seem to imply that the Evil Inclina­tion is a problem, a sickness, and the Torah is its solution, the way to get rid of the sickness. But, as is sometimes the case, a lot has been lost in the translation. In the original Hebrew the Talmud says that the Almighty created the Torah as tavlin for the Evil In- clination. Most translations render that word “tavlin” as “antidote” or “salve”,(“if you take the antidote...you will not be delivered into its hands”), which seems to fit the context; but, unfortunately that’s not really what tavlin means. If you go to Israel today and walk into a shop and ask for tavlin, they won’t direct you to the medicine counter. Instead, they’ll walk you over to the space rack, [[5]](#footnote-5)

and give you a choice of parsley sage, rosemary or thyme. In He- brew, tavlin means “spice.”

Well, that certainly changes things. If tavlin translates as “spice,” what does it mean to say that the Torah is "spice” for the Evil Inclination? What kinds of things do you put spice on?

You put spice on meat; you put spice on food.

Interesting. The Evil Inclination is “meat.” What a profoundly different way of looking at things! If you were stuck on a desert island and could be supplied for a year with your choice of either meat or spice, which would your rather have? I’d venture that most of us would opt for the meat Sgiceis great, hut yon can tliyeon spice. Meat is fuel; meatprovides you with the energy to live.

At first blush, it seems surprising, even blasphemous, to see things this way. How dare you say that the Evil Inclination is more “essential,” somehow, than Torah! But hold your horses and think a bit about what the Sages are saying. For it’s not just the word “tavlin” in this aphorism that defies translation; the term “Evil In­clination” - that thing for which the Torah is meant as tavlin\*-- ш just as slippery a concept to grasp.

What, exactly, is this thing named the Evil Inclination? Isdt the Dark Side of the Force? Is it some horned devil, complete with pitchfork and bright red suit? Is it some scorned angel with a little too much time on his hands who perches above our left shoulder and whispers bad advice in our ear? When we think about the Evil Inclination, we often envision something darkly metaphysical or faintly childish. But, in real life, what is this thing?

If we exchange the language of the Rabbis for modern, psy­chological language, we might say that the Evil Inclination is noth- ing more or less than our passions, our drives, our desires. In fact, we might go a bit further. The Hebrew term for Evil Inclination is Yetzer Hara. The root of the word yetzgog^zilflc create?);. If we translate Yetzer Hara quite literally, it would seem to (ienqte^- get ready for this - the drive to create, [in] evil {formi. Qr, perhaps. more succinctly. Yetzer Hara is creativity gone awry.

Our passions Fuel us; they are engines that make us go. Our

drive to create, in particular, is one of the deepest and most fua- damental ofjour passions. Indeed, thp c.teM\ve drive has many outlets: sexuality; artistic endeavor, the yearning to be an inventor, ambition 6Г almost any sort - these ar^ all expressions of creativity atsopie l^veL Centuries before Freud and Nietzsche, the Talmud insisted that such forces are essential to our humanity. Without energy, without “meat,” you are dead.

But, the Talmud adds, the meat can still use some spice. Lets consider this carefully. What, exactly, does spice do for meat? It gives direction to meat, makes it taste one way rather than an- other. Without any spice, meat is bland; with the proper spices, it’s the dish of kings .

Maybe this explains the Rabbis5 insistence that Torah is the tavlin, the spice, for the Evil Inclination. The Torah gives direc­tion Ц our mosft ba^c. mosj powerful drives. Sexuality, ambi­tion 1 these things are the highly flammable fuel that combusts insideus and makes us go. It is tempting for religion to look at such raw, daunting forces and to frown upon them, to try to sup­press them. The Talmud is saying, thoughT that the answer to the fearsome power of passion is not to go and take the engines out QkQ.ur\_cars.jjot tq renoiinc£-“meat^and.starve. No. the Torah is.designed\_im.t^tQ\_extinguish^passiQn. hut to complement it: to provide spice - direction -\_for it: to make desire taste like some-

ИЏп&јМhe Torahs commands are designed to direct passion to­ward productive ends, toward worthwhile, even holy, endeavors. Feel your passion, your sexuality, your ambition, the Torah says; don’t destroy it. But direct it this wav rather than that way. Steer it; don’t let it steer you.

The Advent of Imbalance

There was a time when this task of steering was not as difficult as It is now. In\_ the pre-Tree world, passion and intellect were more naturally in balance, so moral clarity was easier to come by. We could make decisions with unfiltered vision, without fear that our desires were distorting the moral landscape, without worrying that

our perception of the Creator’s Will had been subtly corrupted by our own passionate will to create.

That world changed - we changed - when we ate from the Tree of Knowledge. After partaking from this wellspring of desire, Adam and Eve became uneasy. As the locus of our identity shifted toward desire, the delicate balance between passion and intellect became altered. It was as if we were riding in a car, but instead of being seated behind the steering wheel, we found ourselves on the hood, seated atop the engine. In the post-Tree world, Adam and Eve - all of us, really - were left to struggle with this dilemma: how do I direct a powerful, massive engine with a steering wheel I can barely reach?

A Newfound Fear

Immediately after eating from the Tree of Knowledge, Adam hears “the voice of God strolling in the Garden,” and he hides, aware that he is naked. Merely hearing God’s voice - not anything in particu­lar that God says, but just the awareness of His ydiee - prompts Adams anxiety. Having just hearkened to the snake’s gambit, hav- ing accepted the idea that God really speaks to humans through their instinct, their interior yoice - at that moment, hearing the voice of God coming from the outside was especially jarring. It was a stark reminder that God does, indeed. speakJo. humans with words.

Hearing God’s voice may have been a stark reminder to Adam that God’s expectations go beyond our simply yielding to the engine inside us, letting it take us where it will. And Adam’s resulting anxiety takes the form of discomfort over his nakedness.

As we mentioned before, the emotion Adam talks about here is not embarrassment - what one would expect from someone who has just realized he is naked - but fear; "I was afraid because I was naked, and I hid” (3:10).

Fear is a world away from embarrassment. I become em­barrassed when a peer teases me, when I make a gaffe in public.

I am fearful, on the other hand, of something I sense that is big-

ger than I am, of something beyond .my. control, of something that can crush me. Be foie he ate from the tree, Adam was well aware that he was naked; he just WMtft/фаЈ4 pf.it. Sexuality, in the old world, had been just a natural part of Me. Why bother with clothes? Now, though, things felt different Sexuality - the biological manifestation of our drive to create - seemed more overwhelming now. Nakedness - direct, unffltered confrontation with our own sexuality - is now a source of fear These powerful passions, newly at the core of my being, may make me godly; but they also can rage beyond control, can’t they? How does one steer an engine as fearsome as this?

The Price of Power

After Adam and Eve ate from the tree, God imposed upon them what we described in the preceding chapter as a grab-bag of punishments: death, pain in childbirth, difficulty farming, and \_ the snake having to crawl on his belly and eat dust But are these Ш punishments really as random as they seem?

Let’s start with the snake. Adam and Ewe were beguiled by a walking, talking serpent into losing sight of the essential dif­ferences between themselves and the animal world. Now, in the aftermath of that failure, God removed that particular source of confusion, yo longer would the animal world seem sn nearly hu­man. The snake would now crawl on its belly and lose its legs, and, presumably, its ability to speak as well Moreover, hatred would reign between the children of Eve and the descendants of the snake. Humankind, having once mistaken itself for snakes, will be less likely to do so in the future.

As for the punishments that affect Adam and Eve, are they really punishments at all - or perhaps just consequences? Let’s go back to the “engine and steering wheel analogy. Imagine you have a car built by a supremely competent manufacturer. It works in complete harmony with everything else built by the same manu­facturer, and it also works in complete harmony with itself.

If there is no friction between the moving parts of the car, for

how long will it last? It lasts forever. Okay. But let’s say you take the car and fiddle with the engine, giving it a more powerful pro­file. You change the rars center of gravity, putting the driver’s seat on top of the hood. Well, now you may have morepqyver. but at.a price. The harmony is gone. Internally, friction is introduced into the system. The parts, ever so slightly out of balance, grind and eventually wear out The system will one day break down. Death has become a reality for humankind.

And the “grinding” has other manifestations, too. Childbirth, previously an effortless experience, now becomes a pain-wracked ordeaL Creativity, the creation of new life, is more jarring now. Moreover, we find ourselves slightly out of sync with everything else built by the Manufacturer. In the past, die world of nature ef­fortlessly provided its bounty for Adam. Now, Adam Enlist beat sustenance out of the ground by the sweat of his brow.fn the past, we were perfectly in tune with the world around ns.. Now, when a tsunami stalks silently toward shore, it is the animal world,.that senses instinctively that something is amiss; it is they that head knowingly for higher ground. Humans remain enclosed in a world of their own, on vacation at the beach, oblivious to. the subtle? shrieking of the natural world all around them.

There is a final manifestation of this disharmony: we must pick up and go now. As a friend once remarked to me: mankind, no longer at home with himself, finds himself no longer at home in the world created for him either. He suffers exile from the Garden and must make the best of it in new and vaguely foreign terrain.

**g' Chapter Eleven**

**Histo**r**y's First** Q**uestion**: Where Are You?

“ \/\f here are you?” God calk out to Adam after the latter has W \* eaten the Forbidden Fruit We asked earlier why the Al­mighty would ask a question when God already knows the answer It’s tune to revisit that issue.

As it turns out, there are two words for °where”in Biblical Hebrew. The more common one is eiphoh - but that’s not the word the Almighty uses when questing after Adam. He instead invokes die less common word for “where” - ayeh.

Is there a difference in meaning between these two words, and, if so, how would one figure out what that difference is? The way to solve such a mystery is not to look at a dictionary - after all, hpw djd the writers of the dictionary figure it out? - but to look at a concordance^. A concordance is a nifty little book (actually, its a nifty big book) that lists every occurrence of every word used in the Bible. The point is; if you can trace when and in what con­texts the Bible uses the words ayeh and eiphoh, then it becomes possible to connect the dots. The composite picture should point to the unique meaning of each word.

ГИ spare you the work of hauling out your concordance. In­stead, Ш show you some examples of where each word appears in biblical literature, and let you draw your conclusions. Here are a few representative samples of eiphoh and ayeh:

Some examples of eiphoh:

* Hagidah na li eiphoh hem ro’im? - Tell me, please, where are they shepherding? (Joseph, regarding his brothers’ where­abouts, Genesis 37:16).
* Eiphoh likatit hayom? - “Where did you gather grain today?” (Naomi to Ruth, Ruth 19:2).
* Eiphoh Shmuel ve’Davidl - “Where are Samuel and David?” (King Saul, searching for his nemesis, David, 1 Samuel 19:22).

Some examples of ayeh:

* Vayigva adam ve’ayo? - “A man dies, and then where is he?” (Job 14:10).
* Hindi haesh...v’ayeh haseh Volah? - “Here’s the fire, but where is the lamb for the offering?” (Isaac to Abraham, ascending, the mountain on the way to the Binding of Isaac, Genesis 22.7).
* Ayeh na Eloheihem - “Where are their gods?” (With refer­ence to idols, Psalms 115:2).
* Le’imotam yomru ayeh dagan veyayn - “To their moth­ers, [starving childrenj will say: where are grain and wine?” (Lamentations, 2:12).

Well, what do you make of it? See if you can isolate a com­mon denominator in each series of quotes,

Okay, time’s up. Ready or not, here’s my take on it:

**1** would submit that eiphoh is a more generic kind of “where” - that is, eiphoh is generally a straightforward request for location. Joseph, for example, simply wants to know where to find his broth-

ers. Naomi wants to know where Ruth has been that day, and Saul is trying to figure out where in the world David is.

Now let’s look at ayeh. For the most part, when this word is used you’ll find that the questioner is not really interested in finding the location of the thing he is asking about By way of example: “Where is the grain” the starving children wonder. The children know there isn’t any grain - if there were, their mothers would have given it to them long ago. Instead, they are exclaim­ing in agony: “What happened to the grain and wine {we used to have]?” The children are not asking where, in fact, the grain is located; rather, they are crying out in anguish over the bald real­ity that it is not here.

Similarly, “Where is the lamb for the offering?” Isaac asks his father on the way up the mountain. Isaacs point is not that he can’t find the lamb. Was it left bade at the shack, or maybe in the pen at home? No. His point is that there is no lamb to be found when, by rights, there should have been. This apparently innocu­ous remark by Isaac packs emotional punch, because in it Isaac begins to realize the terrifying truth - that there is no ram here, after all, and that maybe, therefore, he is the ram. In sum, when one asks, “Ayeh?” his point is not to find out where §Qmethingjs, but to express wonder that the thing is not here, where one would have expected it to be.

This dramatically changes the meaning of God’s question to Adam. The Almighty was not asking, “Where are you?” - a am­ple request for location. Instead he was asking, “Where have you gone? Why are you not here?” As the Sages of the Midrash put it: '“Where are you?’ Yesterday, you were with {me and] my đaat And now, you are with the daat of the snaker (Midrash Rabbah on Genesis, 19:9)

“Ayeh” is the kind qf question you can ask even when you know where something really is. It’s a sadder, more mournful word than eiphoh. It happens that ayekah is spelled withpre- cisely the same Hebrew letters (alephyud, kaf hei} as eicMuthe

cardinal Hebrew word for “lament.” "'Eichah... Look how she sits in solitude!” (Lamentations 1:1), Jeremiah cries, looking upon a destroyed Jerusalem, pining for the bustling crowds who are no longer there, who have been exiled to Babylonia. Adam and Eve, too, have been exiled. And perhaps, like Jeremiah’s, ‘“Eichah!” Gods outcry, “Ayekah?” is less a question than a lament - a lament at the gulf that now exists between human and Creator:

I brought Adam into the Garden of Eden and commanded him.

He transgressed My commands.

I decreed exile upon him.

And [upon his departure], I lamented ‘“eichah/ayekah” [“where have you gone...”].

And so it was with his children.

I brought them into the Land of Israel and commanded them.

They transgressed My commands.

I decreed exile upon them.

And [upon their departure], I [once again] lamented  
“ekhah/ayekah” [“where have you gone...”]

(Midrash Rabbah on Genesis, 19:9)

Twin Gifts

The story of Adam and Eve in the Garden ends with two final acts of God: [[6]](#footnote-6)

In a poignant wav, these Javo events are closely tiedjp рде another. We noticed earlier that cherubs appear just twice in the entire Five Books of Moses. The only other time we find them is when their likeness adorns the top of the Holy Ark in the Taber­nacle, where they guard the Tablets of the Law. Aptly the Book of Proverbs describes these tablets, or the Torah they represent, as another Tree of Life, “a tree of life to all who grab hold of if (Proverbs 3:18). Evidently, the sapie cherubs who keen 11s a wav from one Tree of Life grant us access to another one. In a sense, the Torah may be seen as a replacement Tree of Life. Why was a "replacement necessary?

After attaining tire knowledge of good and evil, human ity became more godly - more passionate, more desirous, more in­sistently creative. But we were only half-gods. Being truly godly means not just to be passionate, possessed of will\* as God is. It means not just to create, as God creates, but to wield wisely the fear­some powerof creation \_ Tt means to control this power fully, not to I be controlled by it. It means keeping passion in balance, realizing 5 that there is a time to create and a time to desist from creating.

After eating from the Tree of Knowledge, after boosting the role of passion in our lives, living eternally was no longer what the Doctor ordered for humankind Anew and different Thee of I .ife was called for - one that could help restore halanre and harmony in the, psyche of humankind. The new Tree of Life was designed to help people cope with a new world - a world inwhich passion Could cloud the mind's eye, obscuring what is genuinely right and what is genuinely wrong. The angels that bar human access to one Tree of Life do indeed grant us access to another one. The Torah is a guide to God’s Will, a tool that gag help p\*\*nplp Hkiingikh thgir gwg creative irgpulses from the voice of their Maker. In con­suming the fruit of this replacement Tree of Life, in assimilating the viewpoint of the Torah, humanity would be able to sit firmly behind the steering wheel, and we would become fully godly be­ings, wisely wielding the power of our engines.

Stand back, for a moment, and contemplate what happened here. Even as God banished us from Eden, He bequeathed to us the tools we would need to succeed in this new world of our own making.

And now let’s talk about God’s next act, making clothes for Adam and Eve. In the world that God envisioned for humanity, there would have been no need for clothes; they would have been a superfluity. It was not God’s choice that people live in a world where nakedness is something to be feared or avoided. Neverthe­less, in this moment of profound disappointment, the Almighty provides Adam and Eve with clothes, giving them the wherewithal to make it in this journey of their own choosing.

Adam's Clothes and Moses's Grave The Sages of the .Midrash (Tanchuma, Vayishlach #10) tell us that the Torah begins with an act of kindness, andit ends with an act of kindness. The kindness it begins with is God’s providingjJothing for Adam and Eve. The kindness it ends yrith, theRabbis write, is Gods act of burying Moses just after he died atop lylt.Nebo, hav­ing gazed at the Promised Land but never having set foot there.

In both cases, things had not turned out the way the Master of the Universe might have wished. Adam and Eve disappointed God by eating from the Tree of Knowledge, and, as a result, were evicted from Eden, consigned to die on foreign soil. For his part, Moses disappointed God by striking the rock, and as a result was kept out of the Promised Land, consigned to die in the bar­ren desert In both instances, people had chosen their own path rather than that of their Creator. And in the wake of both events, people would leave behind the world God had set aside for them for other, unknown shores.

Gods reaction in both cases is the same. By burying Moses in the earth when no one else was present to do so, God personally provided Moses the means of transition from this world to another one - a transition which, had God had His way, would not have happened yet And in providing appropriate clothes for Adam and

HISTORY'S FIRST QUESTION: WHERE ARE YOU?

*Eve,* God provided them with a means of transition from Eder ajworld they had chosen on their own Had the Divine Will hi sway, this transition would not have happened either.

The stark reality is that beings who possess free will don't s ways hew to the hopes and expectations of their creators. If this. so with us in respect to God, it is no less so with our own childrej in respect to us. If we walk away with anything from this dosing piece in this study of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden per haps it should be this: When our children disappoint us, when they make choices we don’t approve of; when they exchange the world we have carefully crafted for them for a dubious world of their own making - perhaps we too, after all the consequences have been meted out, after all the words have been said, after all the anguish has been absorbed - perhaps we, too, can provide them with clothes for the journey

Part ii

The World's First Murder:  
A Closer Look at  
Cain and Abel

£ Introduction

From Eden to Murder

T

he story of Cain and Abel seems as if it could have hap­pened at any point in history. One day, two brothers bring offerings to God. God favors one over the other, and the spumed brother murders the favored one.

For most of us, thats all we need to know. Two brothers be­come rivals, and the rivalry ends in murder. It hardly seems to matter where in the Bible this story appears. It seems a mere point of trivia that Cain and Abel happened to be the children of Adam and Eve, that the story immediately follows the Tree of Knowledge narrative, and that, not so long before, the first humans ate from the Forbidden Fruit and were exiled from Eden. Yes, all that is true - but it all seems incidental. When we read about Cain and Abel, we envision a blank slate, a new chapter in the history of mankind. But slates are rarely as blank as they seem.

In the pages that follow, Iwill argue to you that the story of Cain and Abel bears the unmistakable imprint of the episode that immediately precedes it, the story of Adam and Eve in the Gar­den of Eden. The Torah, in a number of subtle and not so subtle ways, goes out of its way to connect these two apparently very dif­ferent stories. We can debate why the Torah does this, and what

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it is trying to tell us. But the fact of the connection is, I think, not debatable. For some reason, the story of Cain and Abel is suffused with memories of Eden. That’s just the way it is.

You don’t have to take my word for any of this. You can see it for yoursdf. Read the story of Cain and Abel - it’s only a few verses long - but don’t just read it in a vacuum. Read it side-by-side with the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden. At face value, the sto­ries couldn’t seem more different One deals with talking snakes and Forbidden Fruit; the other deals with a spurned offering and an act of murder. But look a little more closely. Embedded in the verses about Cain and Abel, you will find a curious abundance of parallels to the story of Adam and Eve. Certain key phrases, ideas, or events appear in one story, and then reappear unexpectedly in the next one.

What does it all mean? Its too early to speculate about that. But for now, lets just say this: the story of the Tree jjfKnowledge is apparently larger than we might first have imagine^. It seems to indude a “second chapter” - the story of Cain and Abel.

If Im right about this - and I hope soon to show you that I - it means that in order to really fathom the significance of choice to eat of the Tree of Knowledge, we need to examine immediate aftermath of that choice. We need to look at the dory of the world s first murder.

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Chapter One

"So Whose Picture Do You Like Better: Mine or Debbie's?"

I here are lots of legitimate questions we can ask about the bib- JL lical story of Cain and Abel, yet Pm going to begin this dis­cussion of the episode by raising a question that I consider to be wrong-headed and misleading, a question based on a fundamental misreading of the text. But Гт going to ask it anyway

Why would I do such a thing? To be perfectly frank, if I thought I could get away with ignoring the question, I would. But I don’t think I can. The question is too obvious and too troubling. My guess is that most people who look at the Cain and Abel story are immediately bothered by some shape or form of this question. So we might as well talk about it. If we don’t, you’ll just think I’m avoiding it.

To observe the question in context, we first need to summa­rize our story. Here’s a quick snapshot of the narrative, followed by my best, devil’s-advocate-style rendition of a question I don’t really believe in.

Cain and Abel, children of Adam and Eve, each bring offer­ings to the Lord. The Almighty expresses pleasure with the offering brought by Abel, but not with the one brought by his older brother Cain. Cain becomes very upset. Shortly thereafter, he kills his brother, Abel.

Well, class, that’s enough of the story for now. Let’s go around the room: Is everyone here happy with this story? I see a lot of shaking heads. Okay. What’s wrong with this picture?

To be sure, this story doesn’t leave you with that warm, fuzzy feeling inside. What’s really jarring, though, is not Cain’s act of murder. We know from experience that human beings are capable of doing really bad things. What’s really jarring - at least at first glance - is how the Deity chooses to deal with the principals in our story.

Cain brings an offering, and God rejects it in favor Abel’s gift Abels gift was nicer and prettier, perhaps, than Cain’s. The text suggests as much, telling us that Abel brought “from the first of his flocks and from their choicest” (Genesis 4:4), while we hear no such detail about Cain’s offering. Still, a little voice inside us asks insistently: Why does God have to reject one and accept the other?

Imagine the scene: You’re the mommy, and Bobby and Deb­bie, your sparkling, wonderful children, are both working on some surprise homemade birthday presents for you. They’ve got their colored pencils out and are busy creating custom art projects for you. Soon enough, they are done, and each comes over to display his or her work. Debbie walks over first. She proudly shows you her colorful, detailed drawing. She points to the hills, to the sunset, to the little cabin by the stream next to the trees. And she presents the picture to you with a gleam in her eyes: “Here, Mommy... it’s your birthday present?"

Next, it's Bobby's turn, Bobby’s drawing isn’t as detailed. It hardly has much color, and the people who inhabit its landscape

are mostly stick figures. Bobby looks at you expectantly, and now it’s your turn to speak. What do you do?

Every parent in the world knows what to do. You smile, you look at Bobby, you look at Debbie, and then you say: “My, what beautiful pictures you children have made for me!” And you smother them with love and appreciation.

And what happens if the kids are insistent? “No, Mommy, re- ally!” they squeak “Tell us which painting you like betted” What do you do then? Well, you know the drill: “I think they are both wonderful” you say, as convincingly as possible, as you shoo them off to bed. “They are each beautiful in their own way!”

And what, do we think of the parent who doesn’t take this approach? Imagine a parent who gently praises Debbie for her meticulously drawn houses, for the carefully chosen hues of green she used\* for the grass and flowers. But then the parent turns to Bobby and her expression changes as she surveys the choppy lines and sc^bbjieis. -She exclaims: “Oh, Bobby! What kind of drawing is this? You call these people? They are barely stick figures. And that’s a sunset? Please, I can barely see the sun. Come on, Bobby, l|j®kat what Debbie made for me. Now there’s the way to use your crayons!’’

This is not what most of us would call good parenting. Its the kind of thing, we would worry, thats going to put Bobby on the psychiatrist’s couch for many years later down the road.

So now let’s look at the Cain and Abel story. Both Cain and Abel offer their “presents” to God. And God doesn’t smile and say, they’re both so yyonderfull” Instead, God rejects Cains offer- ing and accepts Abel’s.

But I thought parents aren’t supposed to do that What’s going on here? In the story of Cain and Abel, don’t we have a classic case of Bobby and Debbie on our hands? What are we to make of the fact that God dismisses our intuitive parenting advice? Is the Bible trying to disabuse us of our modem notions of parenting in favor of something more stem and unforgiving?

Bobby and Debbie, Redux

**Before giving you my solution to this problem, allow me briefly to make matters worse. Let’s get back to Bobby and Debbie, for a minute, and ask: what happens next? S**

**Imagine you were Bobby and Debbie’s mother, and when your two children had each presented their respective gifts to you, you had inexplicably disregarded that basic rule of parenting, and had favored Debbies gift over Bobby’s. Now, a half hour later, you walk by Bobby’s room and find him weeping softly into his pillow You ask him what’s the matter, and he turns to you and whimpers, “You told me you didn’t like my present!” And then comes the kicker, something my child has tried on me one or two times. He says,** “Mommies aren’t supposed to say things like that to their kids!” **How would you react to Bobby’s plaintive cries?**

**Instinctively, most parents - even those whoi had initially favored Debbies gift - would be unable to resist the sight of a weeping Bobby. Most of us would recognize the error ofourways, would scoop Bobby into our arms and apologize for having turned our back on his gift. You’re right, we’d tell him, Mommy loves you, and I’m so sorry for not accepting your gift the way I should haye} Wed apologize; we’d tell Bobby we’d had a hard day at work, we weren’t paying enough attention; we’d tell him it wouldn’t happen again; we’d tell him just about anything in our desperate attempt to make things right.**

**But that’s not how it happens in the Cain and Abel story.**

**Just after God rejects** **Cain’s offering, and immediately before Cain murders his brother, the Almighty speaks to Cain. But God does not soothingly tell Cain that everything will be just fine, that his offering really was pretty good after all. Instead, God chal- lenges Cain, asking him whether he really has a right to be angry: “Why are you angry and why has your face fallen? Is it not the case that if you do well, then lift up! And if you don’t do well, then sin** lies **crouching at the door...” (4:6-7),**

**What if the parent who had accepted Debbie’s gift but not Bobby’s had told the weeping Bobby that if he had done** better

**everything would be** just fine; that **he should just get over it Most of us would be ready to pick up the phone** and **call Social Services. How, then, are we** supposed to come to grips **with the Almighty’s words to Cain?**

**And now, dear reader, the ball is in your court I began by saying that I felt the questions I am asking here are jQpjt.zgallyje- gitimate. It is my view that the analogy to Bobby and Debbie is faulty and misleading. If you reread the story of Cain and Abel carefully, I think you should be able to spot the flaw; you should be able to see why Bobby and Debbie’s sorry drcumstance actu­ally has little to do with the story of Cain and** Abel **We’ll compare notes in the next chapter.**

I Chapter TWo

The Enigmatic Genius of Cain

I

f the Bobby and Debbie scenario (outlined in Chapter One) is . an appropriate analogy to the Cain and Abel story, you would have to reach the rather heretical conclusion that the Almighty made a “parenting mistake” in dealing with Cain. This view is in vogue lately among contemporary interpreters. In Bill Moyerss nationally televised discussion of Genesis, for example, a fair num­ber of participants were inclined to take that perspective. But the implications of this view are dramatic and harsh, and we might as well be clear about them.

First, it is a tricky business to ascribe errors in judgment to the Almighty. To do so is probably inconceivable from a theologi­cal point of view.[[7]](#footnote-7) But even if we put traditional theology aside,

from a simple rational perspective it seems preposterous to sug­gest that the Creator of All lacks basic wisdom about parenting. It is very hard to swallow that the Master of the Universe is less sophisticated about parenting than, say, Dr. Spock, or the latest self-help guru hawking a book on a talk-show.

Evidently, something is rotten with this comparison to Bobby and Debbie. Somehow, God’s acceptance of Abel’s offering and His rejection of Cain’s was not like Mommy’s preference of Debbie’s pretty picture over Bobby’s stick figures. Why?

Lets go back to Bobby and Debbie, for a moment, and try to isolate the parenting “sin” that takes place when Mommy tells her kids whose painting she likes better. What, exactlyf is she do- ing wrong?

Why My Kids Hate Playing by the Rules of "Boggle" The great sin, I think, lies in Mommy’s stated or implied com­parison of Bobby to Debbie. When Bobby and Debbie compete for Mommy’s love, when they ask whose painting she likes better, that question is a trap. The question, even if asked in the spirit of childhood innocence or playfulness, pits two siblings against, each ocher in a terrible battle for the love and approval of their creator.

If the parent buys into this game, if he or she agrees to play referee in this peat game of combat, that parent has failed before even saving a word. The terms of play are themselves rotten.

This is not to say that it is wrong for Mommy or Daddy to evaluate their children or to give or withhold approval; what is wrong is to Judge one child using the other as a benchmark. The emtotui point of illegitimacy here is the unfai r sense of competi-

faint yyrimmHtw of reality. Whatever God’s ‘arm\*’ means, it doesn’t mean a structure < ony nmd at ikone and flash that God uses to eat his dinner. And whatever God's 'rajpet' implies, it doesn't mean the prosaic emotion that afflicts us mortal\* when wr reakze we vc made a boo boo. Jhe regret of an all-power' fui. aB knowing being is of a different nature altogether, and its true meaning is shrouded m mystery.

tion, the fact that Debbie becomes the measuring stick by which Bobby is judged, the fact that, as a result, neither Bobby’s nor Debbie’s acts are really seen as valuable in and of themselves, but only insofar as they measure up to or outshine the accomplish­ments of the other.

There is a game we sometimes play around the table with our kids. It is a word game called “Boggle ” In Boggle, each player looks at a grid of letters and has sixty seconds to identify a list of words that emerge from contiguous letters. There is a rule in Boggle that all my kids universally hate. The rule is that if all the players around the table have discovered the same word, no one gets any credit for it. Every player is just supposed to strike those words from their list; they simply don’t count

Now, from a strictly utilitarian point of view, this rule makes a lot of sense. It simplifies the process of keeping score. But it’s the message behind the rule, I think, which draws my kids’ ire. The message is: “What you found, what you discovered, doesn’t count, if your brother Bobby found it too” Your acts don’t have inherent worth or value; they can be canceled out by what your siblings do or don’t do.

Was Cain Compared to Abel - or to Himself?

Now let’s look at the story of Cain and Abel, this time reading it more carefully than before. Ask yourself: why did God reject the offering brought by Cain? Let’s read the text and see what it tells us about each brother’s offering:

And in the process of time it happened that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering to the Lord. And Abel, he also brought of the first of his flocks and of their choicest ones. And the Lord turned to the offering of Abel, but to Cain and his offering he did not turn. (Genesis 43-5)

Look closely Is the Almighty playing with Boggles rules, or

not? The text does say that Abel took “from the first of his flocks and from their choicest ones” whereas we hear no\_such detail about Cain, only that he brought “of the fruit of the ground.” The implication is that Abel offered the best of what he had, whereas Cain simply offered some of what he had - average produce, pro- duce that didn’t stand out as either the best or worst of what he had.

But ask yourself this deceptively simple question: when mea­sured against each other, which offering was of higher quality? You might be tempted to answer that it was Abel’s - Abel brought the better stuff. But the real answer is: we simply don’t knqw.

Nowhere is there evidence suggesting Abel’s offering was worth more or was superior to Cains. We know that Abel of­fered the best of what he had, whereas Cain offered simply some of what he had, but we don’t know how one offering stacked up against the other. It is entirely possible that Cain’s offering was worth more, that his average stuff was higher quality than the best of what Abel had. We just don’t know. The bottom line js^ Abel brought the best he could; Cain didn’t. Each brother is compared not to the other, but to himself. What he did is compared tn what he could have done.

If Bobby and Debbie both show up with pictures for Mom­my's birthday, and Mommy discerns that Debbie did the best she could with the picture, while Bobby’s picture looks like something he threw together while watching cartoons on tv, it is entirely appropriate for Mommy to note this fact. It doesn’t matter that Bobby might be the better artist, that at an art auction Bobby’s absent-minded doodles might fetch a greater price than Debbie’s carefully crafted sunset. All this is irrelevant. If Mommy senses that, relative to his own talents, Bobby presented her with some­thing nondescript, she is entitled to voice her opinion.

Which brings us to a very important question: Why did Cain do what he did ? If you’re going to bring an offering to God, wouldn't you bring the good stuff? What exactly was Cain think­ing?

The Enigmatic Genius of Cain In our mind’s eye, I think ш often construct .an inaccuratepor- trait of Cain. One tends to think of Cain as a grudging imitator of Abel. We imagine, perhaps, that Cain saw his brother bringing an offering to God, and, not wanting to be outdone, Cain figured he would play along. His heart wasn’t really in it, though, so he didn’t bring the best of what he had.

BiuLiiLreality.it didn’t happen like that. It wasn’t Abel who had the brainstorm to bring the first offering - it was Cain. Cain was the originator, the first person in the history of the world to bring an offering to God.

It seems strange to say so, but this fact alone qualifies Cain as a kind of spiritual genius. Whatever else one may think of the notion of offerings to God, one thing is sure - the idea has stood the test of time« A wheel may seem simple and obvious, but its inventor is a genius, Cain, too, was a kind of genius - he began something, and hundreds of religions representing millions and millions of people have followed suit All in all, this makes Cain a much harder figure to peg.

How are we to understand a man who introduces the idea of offerings to the world, but then, when he actually brings this first of all offerings, brings nondescript, average produce? If you are an innovator, you are not likely to be the kind of person who does things halfway. Why does Cain, the bold inventor of offer­ings, not bring the best of what he has to God? Cain’s genius is v enigmatic, indeed.

This is the central challenge the Bible presents in this tale:

0 how are we to decipher Cain? Like it or not, the story is not re- ш ally about Abel. He just gets killed, and we know nothing more fA of him. It Is Cain whose legacy endures. It is Cain whose acts and § thoughts are the focus of our story. It is Cain the Torah is asking us to try to understand.

A Question of Placement

Our quest to make sense of this story can be helped I think, by

palling back our zoom lens and getting a broad, landscape view of our narrative. I’d like to get back to an issue I raised in the In­troduction to Part Two, namely: is there any meaning in the fact that the Cain and Abel story appears in the Bible precisely where it does?

On one level, there doesn’t seem to be anything remarkable about the placement of the story. It comes right after the episode of Adam and Eve in the Garden, presumably because thafs when it took place. The narrative appears here because that is ils; right­ful place in the chronology of events, right?

Well, yes, but sometimes chronology isn’t everything. As we saw in Part One, the links between juxtaposed biblical stories often run far deeper than the incidental feet that ofie story happened ' right before or after another. Stories appearing next to each oth№ in the Bible often shed light on each other in surprising ways. - <

Is that the case with the Cain and Abel narrative? Is the story’ of humankind’s first murder connected in anv essential, mean­ingful way to the events that preceded it, namely- Adam and Eve’s experience with the Forbidden Fruity and their subsequent ban- ishment from Eden?

Look at these stories again, and see if you can find any clues. Then turn the page, and we’ll talk.

^ Chapter Three

Echoes of Eden

J

Hhe story of Gain and Abel is suffused with the memories of Eden. Embedded in the verses of the worlds first murder are abundant parallels to the story of the Forbidden Fruit Certain key phrases, ideas, or events appear in one story, then reappear unex­pectedly in the., next one; Let’s examine some of these links

A "Missing Persons" Alert

Immediately after Cain kills his brother, God addresses Cain with a question: “Where is Abel, your brother?” (Genesis 4:9).

One second, that part seems familiar, doesn't it? In the Eden story, there is a question like that, too, no? After Adam commits his great misdeed - after he eats from the Forbidden Fruit - God addresses him with a question as well: “Where are you?" {Gen­esis 3:9), ■„

In each story, God quests after a missing person. And the quest itself is of a very particular kind. It takes the form of the question “ayeh” - where is he?” In our discussion of Adam and Eve in Part One, we indicated that there are two Hebrew words for “where” The more common one is eiphoh; the less common

is ayeh. In each of these two stories, it is the less common, ayeh form of “where” that God uses.

What’s the difference between eiphoh and ayeh? As we dis­cussed earlier, eiphoh seems to be a more generic “where,” a basic request for location. Ayeh, on the other hand, is used when the questioner is less interested in where something is than in why it is not here, where it ought to be. In Eden, it is the ayeh question that is asked: Not where is Adam, but where has Adam gone? What happened to him? So, too, in the story of Cain and Abel, the ayeh question is asked: Not where is Abel, but where has Abel gone? What happened to him?

Hide and Seek

Let’s go on. How do Adam and Cain each respond to the ayeh question from the Almighty? Adam, overcome with the conse­quences of his deed, aware of his newfound vulnerability, states that he has been hiding from God: “I heard your voice in the Gar­den and was afraid because I was naked, and I hid” (3:10).

At first glance, we don’t find anything comparable in the Cain story. We do not find Cain trying to hide behind any bushes, nor does Cain complain about being naked. But listen carefully to the following two verses, and see if you can’t discern in them the echo of Adam’s words:

And Cain said to God; “My sin is greater than J can bear. Here you have cast me away today from upon the face of the earth and from your face I will hide; I will be a wanderer in the land, and everyone that finds me will kill me..(Gen­esis 4’ЛЗ-Ч)

Just as Adam speaks of hiding from God, so, too, does Cain, Tucked into Cain’s response to God is a curious premonition that he is destined to spend his life hiding from the Almighty: ,. and from your face I will hide...” Adam hides in the past tense: at a particular point in time, he hides from God and then explains to

the Almighty that he has done so. Cain hides in the future tense: banished to a life of exile, Cain intuits that he will spend his days in a continual state of isolation from bis Maker

No Place Like Home

The parallels continue. Haying eaten ofthe Forbidden fruit, Adam is told that he and Eve must leave Eden, never to return. They are exiled from the only home they know. Cain, too, must leave home in consequence of hjg actions: “...a wanderer shall you be throughout the land..(Genesis 4:12). Adam and Eve, in the wake of their sin, are forced to leave Eden and make a home for them­selves elsewhere. Cain, in the aftermath of his sin, cannot find a home anywhere.

To Be Cursed from the Ground In addition to perpetual exile, die Almighty imposes one more curse upon Cain. Henceforth, Cain’s efforts at farming will meet with frustration: “And now: Cursed are you from the ground that has opened its maw to take your brother’s blood from your hand. When you work the land, it will not continue to give its strength to you..,” (Genesis 4:11-12).

Once again, we are transported back to the Eden story. It was not iust Cain who experienced difficulty farming at the behest of the Almighty. Adajn[[8]](#footnote-8)too, in the aftermath of eating from the Tree of Knowledge, heard very similar words from God: “Cursed is the land on your account; in toil will you eat from it all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles will it grow for you, and you will eat the grass of the field. By the sweat of your brow will you eat bread..,” (Genesis 3:17-19).

Adam is told that he must wrest his sustenance from the ground; Caffi is told that, although he works the Land, it will no longer give its strength to him.

A Growing Intensity So now, let’s add it all up:

* Both Adam and Cain hear the Divine question: “Ayeh?” v
* Both Adam and Cain express fear and hide from God;
* Both Adam and Cain suffer exile.
* Both Adam and Cain are condemned to experience difficulty farming.

Clearly, the Cain story is filled with the imagery, language, and ideas that animate Adam and Eves banishment from the Gar­den. Somehow, Adam and Eve’s experience in Eden is gone but not forgotten. Somehow, the silent presence - or absence - of the Garden continues to dominate and define the lives of those who have long since left its confines.

The mystery behind, these connections extends still deeper. There is more to the four parallels than immediately meets the eye. The elements are not simply repeated from storv to storv: rather, each element egresses itself a little differently when it reappears a second time. Let’s look for the pattern: •

Paradise their home. Now, they will have to leave these Myl- lic environs to build a new home elsewhere. Cain, too, suf­fers exile, but of a different magnitude altogether: Nn matter where he seeks to build his home, the land will not graciously offer him shelter. Not only must he leave home, but he will never ђе able to call any place his home.

Inehchof these four examples, the response to Cain’s wrong­doing is a more intense version of Adam’s experience. Whatever happened in the wake of Adam & Eve’s eating from the Forbidden Fruit, happens again after Cain murders Abel - but when it oc­curs a second time, it occurs with greater force and impact. Each of these parallel elements intensifies in the story of Cain. What is J0 Bible telling us here! \*

A Working Hypothesis

Mfflvfery least,is apparent that these stories are connected. But the fact that the consequences intensify from story to story suggests more than merely a casual connection between the nar­ratives. It suggests that there is a progression from one incident to the next. It suggests that,failure\_in Eden sets the stage for Cain and Abel. It is.,as if you could place the two stories - Adam and Eve mthe Garden, and Cain and Abel - on successive steps of a ladder. When you face the challenge of the Garden and fail, that sets up a new chafeig® \* a challenge that is a next step on the same ladder. The consequences for failure in the second challenge are rightfully the same as they were at the earlier level, only they are felt more intensely.

What does all this actually mean? Why would a story about eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil set up a story about sibling rivalry, spurned sacrifices, and murder? If the Cain and Abel story is about offering the wrong thing to the Almighty, if it is about the inability of two brothers to get along; if it is about the terrible fruits of jealousy - what does this have to do with the

choice to eat from a mysterious tree that God put off-limits? How, reaJfy, are the challenges faced in one story in any way similar to the challenges faced in the other?

Somehow, the questions Cain feces - what kind of offering to bring to God, whether to invite Abel for a menacing stroll in the field - are born of Adam’s decision to eat the Forbidden Fruit. Our challenge will be to figure out how this is so.

**(?' Chapter Four**

Blood on the Ground

I

Hf it were up to you to sentence the first murderer in the history , of the world, what punishment would you impose? You’d prob­ably trv to come up with something that fits the crime. Perhaps Cain should himself be killed to avenge his brothers blood. If you were in a less punitive frame of mind, you might argue that Cain should be forced to experience something that teaches him about the horrors of murder. Or, if you were really in a lenient mood, you might opt for a rigorous community-service assignment maybe Cain should be required to contribute in some fundamental way to the building of human society,

But God does not choose any of these options. Here is the Almighty’s response:

"And now: Cursed are you from the ground that has opened its mouth to take the blood of your brother from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer give its strength to you; a wanderer shall you be throughout the land.” (Gen­esis 4:11:12)

God declares that Cain shall be "cursed from the earth,” that

he shall experience difficulty farming and be a wanderer. But what does any of this have to do with Cain’s act of killing his brother?

The verse itself supplies an answer. It says that the earth has “opened its mouth to\_accept” Abel’s blood, and for this reason. Cain shall experience a curse with respect to that same earth. But there’s something less than satisfying, at least at face value, with this explanation. One can’t help feeling that the ground’s role is rather incidental here. It happened that Abel’s blood fell on the ground and soaked into the earth, but that doesn’t describe the essential heinousness of the crime, does it? If Abel’s blood had fallen on the kitchen floor instead, would Cain have been cursed through linoleum tiles?

**A Focus on the Ground**

A closer look at things reveals something astir in this text. For some reason, the “earth” is very important in these verses.. The ground is not an incidental part of Cains punishment; it jj§ the essential core of it Everything that happens to him is phrased in terms of the ground. First Cain is told that he will be cursed “from the latuT; next, that when he works the land, the land will no longer give its strength to him; and, Anally, that he will be a wanderer throughout the land. The Torah’s focus on land here is relentles s, and Cain’s anguish in the face of all this is palpable: “My sin is greater than I can bear... here you have cast me away from the face of the earth.. \*

Why, of all things, is Cain’s relationship to the ground tar­geted by the Almighty in response to his act of fratricide? And why is Cain so deeply affected by this targeting?

**Cain's** Name and His Profession

A due lurks in two things we learn about Cain the moment we are introduced to him. The text tdls us his name and his profes­sion: he is called Cam, and he chooses to be a farmer. Curiously, these two facts are related.

One might think of names as essentially arbitrary tags. But particularly in the Bible, names are often important clues. When we name our children, we try to embody our hopes for thenywe try to sum up who we think they are, or hope they will be. All the more so with Cain; for, in fact, Cain was never actually named Cain. He just was Cain.

“And Eve conceived andboreXain.. ” (Genesis 4:1).

Other children in the Bible - Ishmael, Moses and SamueUbr example - are given names by parents or by others. But not Cain, In his case, the association between name and identity runs even deeper. He is not someone merely named Cain; he is Cain; he embodies the word. But what does the name mean?

In Hebrew, Cain’s name is kayiti. The context suggests that the name derives from the word kanah, which means “acquire” Cain the Farmer works the earth. And Cain the Acquirer seeks to ground himself in possessions. For both, land - ground - is indispensable.

Why Real Estate Is So Real

It is no coincidence that people call land “real estate” It is called that because it is the most “real” thing we can have. By compari­son, everything elseis transitory. Everything else comes and goes. Even yve ш.где and go. We. did and are gone But not land. Land sticks around< And having it makes us feel real; it makes us fed anchored to something that lasts,

Cain the Acquirer has a special relationship to land. It is here that we come to an interesting difference between Cain and Abd. While “Cain” comes from the word "kanah” (acquire), die name “ДђеГ comes from the very opposite. In Hebrew; Abd is hevel, which means, of all things, “breath” or, more precisely, the steam that escapes one’s mouth pn a cold winter’s day.

Hevel is a word that appears elsewhere in the Bible. Its most common string of occurrences is in the Book of Ecclesiastes. Hevel, in fact, is the first word in that book: "Vanity of vanities, all

is vanity,” says Solomon in Ecdesiastes. Except what hes really say­ing is Shevel havalim.” Everything is hevel, everything is “breath.”

What does it mean to say everything is breath? It goes to the very heart of the Book of Ecclesiastes. In that book, Solomon, one of the richest, most successful men ever to live, reveals his an­guish - an anguish that is, ironically, the stepchild of his success. His distress comes from the realization that his achievementswill not, cannot last Everything, Solomon declares, is like breath. It all dissipates. It all ends with death. At the great door to the next world, you have to leave everything behind you.

It is not just that you can’t take your wealth or possessions with you. That would be bad enough. But the successful man wants more than wealth. He wants to make a difference. He wants to leave his mark on the world. Here, too, he is frustrated by the problem of “breath.” All the rivers flow to the sea, Solomon ob­serves, but it doesn’t seem to matter. The sea is still not full. We try to make a lasting impression; but, in the end, only one thing lasts: “One generation comes, one generation goes, but the land lasts forever” (Ecclesiastes 1:4).

The earth itself outlasts us. It alone, in the world we inhabit, has the aura of permanence. And by clinging to the earth, we achieve a measure of solace against the great terror of hevel, of breath.

Hevel - Abel/breath - dies. Hevel is unattached and transi- tory; he chooses to herd sheep. But Cain the Acquirer attaches himself to the ground - he becomes a worker of the earth - and relentlessly seeks to share in its permanence.

Triangular Consequence

And now we come back to the consequences for Cain’s act of murder. If you look carefully, I think you’ll find that the three ele­ments of Cain’s punishment are closely related. They form a kind of “triangle/ if you wilL The top of the triangle states a principle, and the two “sides” express how the principle plays out.

The lop of the triangle is the general, opening statement that

Cain will be “cursed from the land”[[9]](#footnote-9) 1 that Cain will be separated from the ground. And what are the consequences of this separa­tion between Cain and the earth? For that, we look to the two “sides” of the triangle. The efFects are that Cain becomes a wan­derer, and he experiences difficulty farming.

We human beings get two basic things from the ground. First, the ground “grounds” us; it gives us a place to be. Secondly, the ground nourishes us. The soil provides us with the fruits and vegetation that we cultivate through agriculture.

Cain related to both these aspects of the ground. He culti­vated the earth in an effort to partake of its nourishment, and he was the “acquirer,” a man seeking “grounding.” Now, in both these respects, Cain becomes “distant” - cursed - from the ground.

First off, the ground will no longer give him a place to be. He will become a wanderer, unable to settle down anywhere.t But it

is not just in the sense of “home and hearth” that Cain is rootless. Cain’s lack of roots expresses itself quite literally in an inability to cultivate roots, an inability to succeed in the great enterprise of agriculture. The second leg of Cain’s triangle is that the ground will no longer give him its strength; it will no longer provide him with the bounty he had sought through forming.

A Divorce from the Earth

For Cain, the impact of this triangle of consequences seems less economic than personal. He has been distanced from something that really matters. This, at least, is how Cain himself seems to see it “My sin is greater than I can bear. Here, you have cast me away today from upon the face of the earth, and from Your Face I will hide”

When Cain speaks of being “cast away” from the earth, the Hebrew word tegerashti. Speakers of Hebrew will be familiar with the word. Its other meaning is “divorce,” the termination of the marriage bond between a man and woman. In Cain’s eyes, he has been rejected, separated - divorced, even - from the earth. This painful distance expresses itsdfin the two fundamental ways the earth takes care of us, in its ability to give us a horne and in its capacity to nourish us. In both these ways, Cain finds himself at odds with the earth.

And so, we begin to see how the twin portraits of Cain ihe Farmer and Cain the Acquirer merge into a fuller portrait of Cain and the consequences that befall himJSut we have so far glimpsed just a part of an even larger, more expansive picture. For in fact, the links between Cain the Farmer and Cain the Acquirer go far deeper than this. Indeed, if we look carefully at these two aspects of Cain, we will discern the answers to the two fundamental ques­tions we raised at the outset Why would Cain, a man bold enough

But he is a wanderer. The harder he tries, the more the dream evades him. He is truly rootless, condemned in every sense of the word to a life of complete transience.

the first recorded offering to God in the history of man- to to give merely average produce as his pi? And why

c 0£ СацЈ go eerily reminiscent of the story of Eden?

ft Chapter Five

Living the Dream of Eve

L

Het’s turn our attention back to the question we first raised ■in chapter two: Why would Cain, the first person ever re­corded to present an offering to God, choose to bring merely av­erage produce in that offering? Why would an innovator choose to do something half-way?

It’s hard to know where to turn for clues. The text itself is very sparse. It doesn’t say much about Cain before he goes and offers his offering, before he goes and kills his brother. But it does tell us something. Wejjrejtold Cains name and his profession. He is a man called Cain, and he chooses to become a farmer, a worker of the land.

As we discussed earlier, both Cains name and his profession revolve around “land.” But I also indicated that there is an even deeper connection between these two facts. U we can succeed in illuminating this connection, it will help us understand what mo tivates Cain and why he makes the choices he does.

Cain and Eve

The truth is: we know more about Cains name than just what it was. We also know how he got it. The text clues us in to the words

hismother spoke when she,was giving birth to him: "[F.vel con­ceived and bore Cain. And she said: 1have acquired a man with God3” (Genesis 4n).

At first glance, Eve’s exclamation seems a trivial piece of infor­mation, a nice bit of color commentary to be sure, but seemingly unrelated to alarger story that revolves around offerings, iealousv. and death. Surely, though, the Bible is not reporting mere deliv­ery-room banter here. Eve has said something significant. She has said something that matters to our story. Otherwise we wouldn’t be hearing about it But why does it matter?

To see the true significance of her words, the first thing we have to do is gently untether ourselves from the English transla­tions. In English, the verse seems to be relaying two disjointed facts, that Eve had a child named Cam,, and just happened to utter such and such a phrase. But the Hebrew tells an entirely diffei- ent story. Listen to the Hebrew for a moment:cc... vateled et kavin, vatomar. lomiti ish et HaShemf”

After giving birth to kayin, Eve says kaniti ish et HaShem. The name Cain - Hebrew ‘kayin - is a paraphrase of tile words his ­mother utters when giving birth to him: “I have ‘acquired’ [kaniti] a man with God.”\* Cain’s name evidently derives from what his mother had to say when birthing him. It behooves us, then, to see if we can understand what she was trying to say.

The Wonder of it All

**“I have acquired a man** with God.” The phrase, at first, seems **strange and cryptic** We **might understand** it, though, if we con­**sider what** we **might have said had we found ourselves** in **Eve’s position.**

Eve had just gone through an event we've grown used to call­ing “childbirth". Yet Eve didn’t just experience any run-of-the-mill act of childbirth, if indeed one can call any birth "ordinary”. She

\* Kayin is actually an anagram formed from the first three letters of kaniti. Kuf, Nun, Yud is transposed to become Kuf, Yud, Nun.

HO

was a principal in the first human birth in the history of man­kind.

As a father, I am obviously limited in my ability to talk from experience about the act of giving birth. But if I can extrapolate anything from the way my wife remembers the moments she gave birth to our children, I can tell you that a woman experiences this event as a supreme wonder. Yes, the experience is usually painful beyond words; but, at least in my wife’s case, the enormity of the pain was mixed with her palpable sense of awe at what was hap­pening. She was experiencing the creation of a new being, liter­ally, from the inside out. She was not a passive bystander in that experience. She was herself a partner in a new, bold, visceral act

A partner with whom? Well, the obvious answer would be “me”, the father. But I’m actually not referring to myself here. It is humbling to say so, but the man’s role in all this is rather fleeting, and a woman in the throes of childbirth can easily overlook it At least Eve apparently did. The partner I am referring to is another Being - the Force, as it were, behind the womb.

The womb is an astounding organ. Hundreds of years of med­ical technology and billions of dollars in research have failedUo replicate it-We have learned how to conceive fetus« in test tubes, but we cannot grow them into children without a womb. A child that leaves this special place more than a few months before its time simply has no chance of surviving. There is no such thing as an artificial womb.

The uniqueness of the womb is a bit surprising, since at first glance it doesn’t seem to do all that much. But it is precisely the womb’s quietness - its ability tobestilljjq “listen” and gently re­spond J that is its genius. Modem science has revealed the womb to be an exquisitely responsive organ, a vehide that sans« its oc­cupant's every need and tailors itself to accommodate that need. It provides a precise and ever-changing balance of nutrients; it maintains perfectly calibrated ph levels; it discreetly disposes of toxins; it provides the right enzymes and antibodies at precisely

the right time and in just the right doses. The biochemistry of the womb is complex beyond imagining. A womb is not the work of humans. We could never have devised it. Through her womb, a woman encounters not just her child, but the Almighty Ffimself In her own creativity, she experiences the nearness of the Creator of AIL

If every woman who goes through childbirth is at least dimly aware of this mystery - if every woman, at least to some extent, senses the “science-fiction-like” quality of childbirth - think how Eve must hare felt What she went through didn’t just seem utterly new and unprecedented. It was utterly new and unprecedented. This was the first human birth in history. No one had ever been through this before. She must have experienced herself as being part of a miracle beyond imagining.

Eve saw dearly the breathtaking implications of her expe­rience. Until now, there was only one Creator in the world. He alone was responsible for the existence of everything, from moon and stars to grass and trees, from elephants and zebras to sky and earth. But all that changed now. Now. God had taken a partner and had ushered her into the great secret of Creation. That part­ner wg5j}g&.

“I have acquired a man with God!” (Genesis 4:1), Eve cries exultantly. *Look what God and I have done. We have created this little man together!*

**Moshe and the Tomato Plant**

We are **now,** I **think, in** a **position to** see a deeper, more vibrant, **link between** Cain’s **name and his** profession. It is not just **that both of these revolve around land. Rather, both Cain’s name and his profession speak to one of the most** intoxicating **pursuits that we as human beings can hope to be engaged in. Each speaks to the possibility of becoming a partner with** God **in the act of cre­ation.**

**Think about it - what’s the big deal in being a** farmer? Yes, you get the obvious utilitarian benefits. You can get food by rais­ing crops. Plus, you remain connected to the land, you remain “grounded”, as we suggested before. But there is something more. There is great joy to be found in farming, a iov that many of us moderns have become too jaded to see.

In our world, we are used to seeing fruits and vegetables as mere things. We either consume them at our table (if we care about nutrition), or we trade them on the commodities exchange (if we care about our pocketbook). Tomatoes, as any good dty- ehild will tell you, come from the supermarket, not from the ground. But there is another story that fruits and vegetables tell, and it iišfa story that can leave us awestruck. We can still access that wonder if we try.

I personally discovered that wonder through my child. It sounds ridiculous to say it now, but when my son, Moshe, was maybe three or four years old, I used to regale him at bedtime with storiesiabout him and his imaginary friend, his ceiling fan. Yes, “Moshe and the Fan” had all sorts of adventures together. There were the usual cops and robbers tales, of course, but the story that really captured my son’s attention was the one about the tomato garden. It goes like this;

Once upon a time, Moshe took some little seeds from a pouch and sprinkled them on the ground. “What are you doing?” asked his trusty fan. Moshe explained that he was planting tomatoes. “Don’t be ridiculous,” said the fan, “those aren’t tomatoes. Those are little tiny crumbs. And why are you wasting them by putting them on the ground ?” Moshe told his fan to be patient, and went to fetch his shovel. “Why are you burying those things?” shrieked the fan, “now you’re really ruining them!” But the fan had seen nothing yet. Soon, Moshe started dumping water on the ground with his bucket, “You’re drowning everything and just making a muddy mess,” said the fan, “let’s go home ”

But Moshe, so the story goes, would not be deterred. He pa­tiently explained to his friend that he was planting seeds; that these

would soon grow into green, leafy plants; and that these plants, in turn, would soon give him lots of tomatoes. The fen couldn’t con­tain his laughter. He thought Moshe had lost his mind.

Every day, Moshe would drag his chortling fen back to the same spot in the backyard and would look to see if his plants were growing. And every day, the fen would make fun of him. “This planting thing is ridiculous,” chided the fen. “When are you go­ing to outgrow these childhood games?”

Well, you know what happens next. One day, as Moshe was dejectedly walking back from his plot of land, he turned around for one last peek. “There!” he shouted. “Do you see that little green shoot? That’s my plant!” And sure enough, there it was. The to­mato plant continued to grow, and suffice it to say that by the tune- bedtime was over a vindicated Moshe and his no-longer-skeptical fen were delighting in a feast of newly-harvested tomatoes.

Every time I would tell this story, my four-year-old son would\* be enthralled. It was just the most fabulous tale in the world him. He wanted to hear it over and over. And he wanted to start planting his own tomatoes.

Living the Dream of Eve

Children aren’t dumb. One of the Mg differences between us and them is that we’ve seen more of the world than they have. Often, that translates into valuable life experience, but sometimes it just means we’re more jaded than they are. In the case of Moshe and his tomato plant, I am convinced that a child’s unabashed won­der and joy is the more genuine human response to the saga of the tomato plant. A little child knows to pay homage to its spec­tacular journey from seed to stalk. A grown-up’s failure to stand in awe at the tomatoes he puts in his supermarket bag is not, by comparison, anything to be proud of.

So Cain chooses to be a farmer. A strange coincidence, wouldn’t you say? Eve exclaims that she has become a partner with God in creating new life. And then, Cain, her son, chooses his own path to that same thrilling goal. He is not a woman. He

rannpt bear fruit of the womb. But he can do the next best thing. He can cultivate the fruit of the land. He can do through land what Evi does through her hndv. He can place a seed in that which is fertile, cultivate the growing plant and become a pytner with the Divine in the wondrous unfolding of life.

Cain’s name and his profession both point to the intoxicat­ing wonder of the tomato plant Eve’s jubilant exclamation is Jhe seed of Cains name, and Cain, in turn, devotes his life to planting seeds - seeds which carry forth his mother’s dream, bringing it to fruition in the new dimension of agriculture.

Our quest to understand Cain, though, is not over yet For all of this, somehow, mjigt be relevant to the rest of the story- to jealousy, offerings, and murder. In order for us to see how, we need to look, again at Eyes exclamation of wonder, for there is something just a little bit odd about what she is saying. Instead of exclaiming, as we might have expected, that she has “created” [Hebrew: borati] a little man with God, or that she has “formed” \yatzart$ a Uttleffilan with God, she says something else entirely. She says kaniti.. .that she has “acquired” a man with God.

What does she mean by such strange words? The oddity of her declaration cannot be dismissed as incidental, for it is precisely that “odd” part of what she says that is the genesis of Cains name: Kayinis named for hff word “kaniti”, I have acquired.

Eve was trying to say something more. And that thought, whatever it was, found living expression in her son. Now we just hawt'P figure out what it was.

^ Chapter Six

What Kind of "With"?

S

Bo Cain derives his name from his mothers declaration that

||tt| has acquired a man with God. We pointed out above that

Eve’s Use of the word “acquire” is a bit odd. Truth to tell, though, this is not the only oddity in Eves declaration. Something else is a bit strange as well. It has to do with the way Eve says that she has partnered “with” God.

If you were a Hebrew speaker, and you wanted to say that you had done something “with” someone else, how would you say it? Which Hebrew word would you choose for “with”? The word you would immediately, instinctively reach for would be “wT. You can grab your dictionary and look it up. The word “inf appears everywhere in the Bible, and it is the most basic and plain way to say “with”.

But this is not the word Eve uses. She uses the word V” This. too, is a common word in the Bible, and “еСсаи mean.'VithH at least occasionallwNine times out of ten, though, \*et” means some­thing else entirely. It performs a particular grammatical function that would be entirely out of place in Eve’s sentence. We’ll talk more about what “et” usually means shortly, but, for now, suffice it to say that Eve avoids the far more common word for “with”,

(“im”) and uses the much more jarring, seemingly out-of-place “et” instead. Why would she do that?

**From Creator to Owner**

Well, first things first. Eve talks about "acquiring” rather than “cre­ating”. Is there a relationship between the two words; that is, the word we would have expected her to use (“create”) arid the word she actually uses ("acquire”)?

Clearly, the words are related. “Acquiring” conjures up no­tions of “haviqg” or "owning” and^indeed. a creator.co.uld.be said to “have” or “own” the things he or she creates. He might be said to “acquire” them through the act of creating, them. So creation, we might say, leads to ownership, right?

Well, sort of, but not necessarily. Creation can lead to own­ership, but it doesn’t have to. Lets stop and define our terms here. When I say that I own something, this means that I am asserting my right to control the thing and to keep you from using it. Now, after I make something, I can decide to assert this right if I want to, but I don’t have to. I could alternatively decide that what I’ve\* made is open to the world, and people can use it freely. JfJ make a software program, I can file a patent and assert my exclusive rights over it, or I can put it up on my website and declare it “free­ware”. ft is up to me.

The act of creation, then, sets up a choice. The choice con- cems my relationship to that which I’ve created,. Will I choose to assert my control over it? Will I choose to own it? Eve, at least in her own mind, seems to have made this journey from “creator” to “acquirer" - she, along with God, has “acquired” this little man. Which leads us to ask: why, exactly, would a creator choose to make this journey to ownership?

When It's Not About Money Anymore The most obvious motivation for a creator to assert his rights of ownership, 1 suppose, would be economic. If I own something, I can sell or trade it for other things of value. But there are certain

things which are “ours” that we don’t own in an economic kind of way - children come to mind - and unless Eve was intending to put Cain up for sale on the slave market, its doubtful that fi­nancial gain is what she has in mind when she calls Cain “hers.” Indeed, the lure of cash does not by any means exhaust the list of reasons I might want to “own” that which I curate. Stephen King has a lot of money already, maybe more than he can use, but he still makes sure to copyright books. Why?

A deeper reason a creator wishes to exert ownership, 1 dunk, is a sense of pride in what he’s made. By this, I don't mean pride mm bad sense; I mpan jHn a natural sense. What I’ve made is an expression of who I am. It is precious to me. I poured resources, energy, and ingenuity into its making, and I want to make sure the thing maintains its integrity once it is released into the world at large.

To clarify the point: calling myself the owner of what fve made is not necessarily a selfish act I may well be ready to part with what I’ve made, to bestow it as a gift to others or to the world, but I still want to make Sure the world receives what I intended to give ft. I doh’t want my precious creation to be adulterated or cor­rupted by other well-meaning but misguided hands. Sometimes. I assert that what Ive made is mine merely in order topmtectwhat I think is. its, core identity.

Speaking personally, I can certainly relate to the impulse of a creator to see himself as an owner A number of years ago, I was asked by a local organization to develop a series of dasses on the “Meaning of Life According to Judaism” It seemed like a hope­lessly vague and probably fruitless assignment But after many days and weeks of work, I had finally put together something that well, I really liked. I was truly proud of the outcome. And all of a sudden, I felt terribly reluctant to do what I had said I would da I was; supposed to teach the course to a number of teachers, who would then go out and teach it to students. But I didn't want to do that anymore. I feared that the organization that had commis­sioned the project didn’t really understand what l had put together,

and I worried that the delicate tapestry I had constructed would become corrupted in the hands of others who didn’t care about it as much as I did. I can’t say I’m proud of feeling this way but[[10]](#footnote-10) for better or worse, I just wasn’t prepared to give upLControLaver what I had made. It was too dear to me,

In using the word “acquire” rather than “create,” perhaps Eve was making some sort of journey from creator to owner. Not an owner in a base, economic sense, but in a fuller, even spiritual sense. What she created with God .was. not.something trivia) nr incidental, but something imbuing her life with new sanctity and meaning. Indeed, Eve’s very name speaks\_to this life goal. Eve, or in Hebrew Chava. is short for em kol chat “Mother of All Life.” The fruits of her partnership with the Almighty are not inciden- tal to who she is; they help define who she is. The child would be both hers and God’s, come what may. Cain mattered to her in the deepest possible way.\*

From Im to Et

But to truly understand Eve, we must confront her unusual use of “et” instead of “im” While “et” can be used to mean “witb|’;^s Eve seems to use it here), that is not the usual, dominant meaning of the word. What, in fact, does “et” usually mean?

Before I answer, let me make my case as to why it’s even important for us to know this. Why should we be so concerned with the other meaning of “et,” if that’s not the meaning that Eve intends?

The answer is this: when it comes to Hebrew, synonyms (like, for example, “et" and “im”) are a tricky business. You always have tft a\*k why therejaff twp words' for ap idea when one would have done just fine. More often than not, the two synonymous words don’t mean exactly the same thing; they are instead slightly dif­ferent flavors of the same ice cream. We saw an example of this a

while back when we were talking about the words “eiphoh” and “ayeh” in connection with Adam and Eve. These two words, each ostensibly meaning “where,” actually signify two very different questions: “where?” vs. “where have you gone?” Likewise, when it comes "to “with,” if there are two Hebrew words for this idea, it may well be that the idea itself comes in two different flavors.

How do you discern the taste of each flavor, foe precise mean- ing of each term? One way to do it is to look for alternative mean­ings of eachword. If “et” has a primary meaning and a secondary meaning, it may well be that the secondary meaning derives from the primary one. The kind of “with” that “et” expresses may be influenced by whatever else this word “et” really means.

Getting At Et

Sojnow, back to our question: what does “et” usually mean, when itdbesnk" mean “with”? Well, I’m glad you asked. The question, though, isn’t so easy to answer, for the primary meaning of the word “et” has no English counterpart It is a grammatical utility tool unique-ld-the. Hebrew language. It provides a bridge, a link, between a verb and a direct object In English, we don’t have a need for any special words to perform this task. We just put the ^erb'and direct object right next to each other and call it a day. In Hebrew, though, “et” would be inserted between the two to com­plete the link.

Here’s a quick example. In English, if you struck a little round thing, you would say, “I hit the ball,” and it would be dear to all what you meant. In Hebrew, though, you wouldn’t say it that way. You would use the word “et” to create the link between verb gnd object. You would say hikeiti “et” hakadur - on “Lhitef theJhall"

So allow me to be the first to congratulate you - you are now an expert in Hebrew grammar, and there, it wasn’t even so painful, was it? But the real prize is that you are now in a better position to understand the Bible. For now that you know what “et" usu­ally means, you can see what it might have meant when Eve used it to mean “with.”

**Co-Subject or Tool?**

In English, as in Hebrew, the word “with” admits of two meanings. I can say that I wrote this chapter with a co-author. (I didn’t.) Or I can say I wrote it with a word-processor. (I did.) In each case, I am using the same word "with,” but I mean vastly different things:

* One kind of “with” denotes full companionship: the other denotes subservience.
* One kind of “with” indicates an equal partnership: the other, an unequal partnership.
* One kind of “with” is denoted by “im”; the other bv “et.”

The “im” type of "with” points to a co-subject,^ another.au­thor, for example, who along with me, plans, plots and writes the chapter The "et” kind of "with” though, doesn’t point to another subject at all It points to an object - a tool. thatJlm a ke\_nse of to achieve my goal.

TABLE I: “IM” VS. “ET”

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| I, with Sam, my fictional friend, | Subject Clause |  |
| wrote | Verb | Wrote |
| this chapter | Object Clause | this chapter with my word processor |
| “Im” type of “with” |  | “Et” type of “with” |

In a curious way, perhaps the two meanings of “et” really arc the same. “B^ when used as a grammatical link, points to an object in a sentence. And et,” when used to mean with, pqints tq an object, too. It indicates what a subject uses to get something done.

So now, one more time - when Eve said “I acquired a man with God,” what was she really saying? The two halves of Eve’s

marvelously concise statement mesh to form a fascinating whole. Eve perceives herself a partner with the Almighty in the sacred an I miraculous act of creation. The fruit of this partnership mat­ters to her, means everything to her; she has actniired- not merely

who she is. And vet this is not a partnership of eqiials. One partner is subject: the other is object One is innovator: thejžther.^iool ~ ^^^chlpartoerJsjwhichI Wbich4frjheianQyater,.aad which is the tool?

**^ Chapter Seven**

Thomas Edison and the Glassblower

I he year is 1879. The place: Menlo Park, New Jersey. You are a JL glassblower. But it is merely a job, you are quite sure - not a life’s calling. Orphaned at a young age, you dropped out of high school to take over your fathers glassworks shop. Since then, you’ve reliably provided for your mother and sisters, and you are proud of that. But sometimes, late at night, you lie awake. You’ve never quite shaken off the urge to be a part of something larger.

During the years you’ve spent in your humble shop, the realms of industry and technology have exploded with innovation. The telegraph came into being just a few years ago, and the world will never be the same. Things that seemed the stuff of sdejnce fiction are becoming a reality. It is all happening in your lifetime. You would give anything to be a part of it

Alas, though, fate and fortune have had other plans. Day after day you ply your trade, and customers come and go. But one day something curious happens. A man comes into your shop with an unusually keen interest in the work you are doing. He looks at

the delicate balls of hollow glass you’ve constructed and compli­ments you on your skill. Then he tips his hat and leaves.

Behold, the Bush Was Ablaze,

But It Was Not Being Consumed...

One night, about a month later, you are walking home from work when something catches your eye. All the houses are dark, save one. At the far end of the block, a light shines from a living room window. You walk up to investigate the possible danger - perhaps a candle has been left burning unintentionally - and are startled to find that the source of the light is not a candle at all. Instead, there is a man hunched over a glowing ember, enclosed in glass. The ember is white hot, its shine is bright, but strangely, it doesn’t seem to be burning...

Suddenly, the ember flares and the man recoils. The glass shatters, and the house is plunged into smoky darkness. You hurry away, but in the glare of the ember, you have caught a glimpse of the mans face. It was that fellow you met in your shop a month ago.

That night, you can’t stop thinking about the strange light.

A voice inside you urges that something momentous is afoot. You feel that somehow, on the sleepy streets of Menlo Park, the world is about to change forever. You throw off the covers, pull on a bathrobe, and hurry down the street to that house. The man opens the door and greets you with a smile. “I’ve been waiting for you,\* he tells you with a wink. “I could use the services of a. good glassblower.”

At three in the morning that cold December night, Thomas Edison tells you everything. You hear about his quest to harness electricity to create a lasting, reliable form of illumination. For (he first time, he tells you, people will have the benefit of light without the aid of the sun or a flame. He shows you his sketches and his calculations. He is almost ready to unveil his invention. But he is missing just one thing. That is why, he tells you, it was so fortu­nate that you showed up at his house this evening.

For Edison’s new “light bulb” to actually work, the ember - or the filament, as he calls it - needs to be encased in a complete vacuum. There can’t be any air whatsoever in the inner chamber, or the filament will ignite and the device will explode. He needs, he tells you, the services of a good glassblowen someone who can create a hollow ball of glass filled with a perfect vacuum.

You tell him you can do it, that he’s come to the right man. You’ve been making glass ornaments all your life, and it’s not so hard to suck the air out of the sphere as you seal it You return to his shop the next evening, and you easily mease Ms contraption in the clear, sealed chamber he has been looking for. Edison turns a switch and the dream he told you about takes shape before your eyes. The carbonized sewing thread inside the crystal orb begins to glow steadily and evenly. The seconds turn to minutes, and minutes to hours. The light continues to shine. You and Edison have done it.

Days later, you both invite the entire neighborhood to Edi­son’s makeshift garage laboratory. You and he have rigged it from end to end with wires and with these new-fangled light bulbs. Its a moonless night and the sky is black, but with one flick of the switch, all that changes. The entire laboratory is illuminated with the light of a hundred tiny suns. The mm and women who have come to watch erupt in spontaneous applause.

Your dream has come true before your eyes. The age of the incandescent light bulb has dawned, and you, the humble glass- blower from a small New Jersey hamlet, have been a part of it What more could you ask for?

The Danger of the Dream

The story seems a happy one. But it won t necessarily end that .way. Troubled waters may Ue just below the surface of this idyllic little scene. The trouble begins this way.

Your partnership with Mr. Edison may have started with a chance encounter, but it is not a trivial opportunity. Its possi­bilities touch the core of who you are and what you want to be.

dassblowing is all very nice, but you don’t think that’s what your life is truly about. What’s really made your stay on earth mean­ingful, you fed, is this great opportunity to create on a^grand scale - this chance to seize nature boldly by the throat andjnake something new out of it, to ћшш^АсДадбошеЈроугег othght- ning in a glass ball and transform people’s lives forever.

Now consider this: What happens when soroethingyouinike means so much to you that you view the wondrous creation as an expression of your deepest self, that you feel a need to safeguard it assiduously; that you see yourself not merely as its “creator” but as its “acquirer,” as its rightful owner? On the one hand, there is nothing evil or malevolent about making this jump from “creator” to “owner.” But it produces certain challenges. Especially when that which one cherishes\_was not madehyJbiim-dQneJiutwas made in partnership with someone else.

Who's Who?

The first great challenge is this: Will you see this partnership for what it truly is, or will you see it as you wish it to be? Let’s talk about you, the glassblower, and Mr. Edison. Who is the major partner in this endeavor, and who is the minor partner?

Well, let’s see. Edison came up with the idea, sketched put the plans, did the calculations, spotted the pitfalls, planned how to correct them, and designed the first working model of the light bulb. And you were the glassblower who filled an order for a ball of glass with nothing inside.

It seems pretty dear that you are the minor partner. But that’s not necessarily how you would choose to see it, **Tt is a dif-** ficylf thing to be the junior partner in your life’s dream: And in any case, there is another way to look at things..,

*It’s been five years since my first, fateful meeting with Edison.*

*As I’m leaving the office one day, I glance behind me at the words emblazoned across the entry way to our new corporate*

*headquarters, Edison & Fohrman Electric Works. And for the first time, I feel vaguely uneasy.*

*“How come it has to be 'Edison & Fohrman Electric Works?” I wonder to myself.* *“Why sure, die sign guys had to put one of our names first, and ‘E does come before if we*

*follow alphabetical order - but really now, couldn’t it just as easily have said Fohrman & Edison’ Electric Works? I mean, lets face it. Thomas is a nice guy and all, and far be it from me to actually bring this up with him, but, you know hed never be anywhere without a good glassblower like me in his life. Why, he’d still be out there in his garage with tight bulbs exploding all around him. Sure, he came up with all the plans; but, it* is *one thing to think of things, its another toputthem into prac­tice. You know, I really should talk to those sign guys about reversing the names..”*

Eve and Cain

Eve’s exclamation upon delivering die first human child may well have been her attempt to grapple with this very dilemma. How does one balance the burning passion to create new life — the sense that ones destiny and purpose is bound up in this aston­ishing ability to create a new person - with the reality that one is the junior partner in this enterprise?

Eve declares that she has acquired a little man with God - kaniti ish et HaShem. As explained in the previous chapter, the word “et” conveys the kind of “with” that normally signifies an unequal partnership, a partnership of subject and object, of actor and tool. But thejprecise meaning of Eves phrase is difficult and elusive. Who, exactly, is the actor, and who is the tool?

Does she mean that God is the primary partner and die, the vehicle by which the child came to be, is secondary? This would certainly seem to reflect the reality of die situation. God is the ar­chitect of the system of reproduction; God designed it; and God alone stands behind its intricate biochemistry. Eve brings this

design into the world in a practical sense; she is the glassblower, as it were, providing a vehicle through which the Almighty’s art­istry can find its physical expression.

Is this what Eve means? It could be. Here is the argument in favor of translating her words that way: "Et,” the "unequal\* kind of “with,” might mean something like “along with” - as in, “I went shopping along with you.” Here, I am secondary to you; the sense of the phrase is that I am tagging along with you. Something like this, for example, seems to be what the Bible has in mind when it says that Joseph was shepherding “et” his brothers (Genesis 37:2). Joseph was shepherding along with them; he was tagging along, as it were. Similarly, Eve may mean that she has created this little man along with God, the primary Creator.

But it may not be so simple. As a matter of feet, even in the case of Joseph, it may not be so simple. Look again at that verse about Joseph and his brothers. This time, however, let’s view the words in their larger context:

“Joseph was seventeen years old, and he was shepherding ‘et’ his brothers through sheep...and he brought back bad reports [about his brothers] to his father” (Genesis 37:2)..-\*

There is something incongruous in that sentence. What is it supposed to mean that Joseph was shepherding along with his brothers “through" sheep? Yes, you heard right, that is what the original text says. The Hebrew prefix b, placed here before the word “sheep,” signifies either “through,” “with,” “concerning,” or some similar preposition. None of these words easily make sense in the verse, and indeed the phrase “shepherding through sheep” appears nowhere else in the entire Torah.

The verse, I think, suggests a secondary level of meaning. On the one hand, yes, Joseph is shepherding along with his brothers, and what they are shepherding is sheep. But on another level, what Joseph is really tending is not sheep at all. He is tending his broth’ ersr, and he is doing it through the medium of sheep.

Let me explain. Think about what Joseph is really doing in this verse. He is using the opportunity of shared work-time with

his brothers to bring back reports about his brothers to their fa­ther. Thus, while ostensibly shepherding with his brothers, he is in fact tending them - using sheep in order to do so. The broth­ers are more like the direct object of Joseph’s shepherding than co-subjects along with Joseph.

When it comes to Eve, a similar kind of double meaning may reside in the verse. On the one hand, Eve declares that she has created this child along with God. But recall that God appears after the word “et” in a spot usually reserved for a direct object. Perhaps a secondary meaning whispers something else: God>her partner in this act, has been the means through whidi shehasbepn able to acquire this man-child. She has used the services of God to bring about her dream.

The difference between one meaning and another is subtle, but it is not inconsequential. In fact, it may be that the discrep­ancy between them becomes fully recognizable only in the next generation - in the hands of the man Eve ha^ acquired, in the hands of Kayin/Cam.

Indeed, how the glassblower views Edison is not just an issue of attitude and perspective. It also influences how he acts toward Edison: it infiuences.the kind.nf gifts the glassblower might choose to give him. And therein, I believe, lies the key to understanding the mystery of Cain’s rejected offering.

Chapter Eight

The Keys to the Heavenly Cookie Jar

I he story of Cain and Abel, the story of humanity s first offer- JL ings, raises a knotty theological question: Does God really need these offerings, or any offerings, for that matter? Is God really sated by the odor of meat rising from the altar? Is it conceivable that the Master of the Universe, the Creator of all Life, would need sacrifices of animal or plant life to keep Him happy? It seems an insult to our concept of the Creator to assume any of this.

Keep these issues in the back of your mind as we wrap up our look at the glassblower and his friend Mr. Edison.

Edison and the Glassblower, Redux

It’s been almost a year since the incorporation of Edison and Fohrman Electric Works. Thomas and I are busy planning our gala, first anniversary party, to which virtually the whole *town* will be invited. It occurs to me that this would be a good time for me to give my partner, Thomas, a gift...

Earlier, we saw that the glassblower who assisted Edison in creating the light bulb had a fateful choice to make. Would he have the courage to see himself as he really is - as the junior partner in the venture - or would he invert that reality, fancying himself the primary innovator, with his friend Thomas a mere apprentice?

But it is not just a matter of how the glassblower chooses to think about Edison. It is also a matter of how he acts towards him. For when the glassblower decides that he really should give a gift to his partner, Thomas, what precisely is his motivation?

When Prudence Is Not a Virtue

One motivation the glassblower might have for his gift is pure gratitude. If the glassblower is emotionally courageous, if he can assimilate the truth about his relationship with Edison, he will recognize the overwhelming debt he owes his friend. And he will want to find a way to express that recognition to him:

*“Through Edison, I have had a hand in one of the greatest in­ventions of all time; I have risen beyond my wildest hopes to become a part of history. I am eternally grateful that he has allowed me to have a small part in all this. I have to find some way to express this to him...”*

But dear-eyed gratitude is not the only motivation our glass- blower might have. What if he finds it too painful to recognize he is only a junior partner in his life’s dream? What if. instead-effac­ing that truth head-on, our glassblower chooses to invert reality and adopt the fantasy that he, not Edison, is the primary partner in the venture? He could then surmise that he is not really indebted to Edison; that, if anything, Edison is indebted to him.

This doesn’t mean our friend is going to nix the idea of giving Edison a gift. It just means that there’s a different motive behind the gift. Whatever the glassblower tells himself, in the back of his mind he knows he needs Edison, and that at all costs, he must preserve his relationship with him:

*“You know, Thomas and I are pretty chummy right now* - *but you never can be too careful. What if some other glassblower tries to crash this party and weasel his way into Edison’s con­fidence? I mean, I know Thomas would be a fool to drop me for someone else, but Thomas has always been a bit naive about the intricacies of glassblowing It might just be prudent for me to buy him a little something in advance of next week’s party^^M*

Xhis second kind of gift is very different than the first It is not really about gratitude; it is about insurance. It is not an expres­sion of personal feelings so much as it is a concession to business necessities. There are costs to doing business, and one of those costs is keeping the people that you need happy.

These differences in motivation begin in the mental realm, in the private realm of the giver’s mind. But these differences don’t stay private for long. They invariably express themselves in the nature of the gift one chooses to give.

A person expressing a profound sense of gratitude gives the best he can. A person buying an insurance policy is looking for a reasonable deal.

If the Almighty Has No Needs,

How Can I Give Him Anything?

Let’s return to the question we raised at the beginning of this chap­ter. Does God really need what we are trying to give Him? The answer must be that an offering, in its genuine religious sense, is not an attempt to fulfill the “needs” of God. The Almighty doesn’t have any needs - that, indeed, is why they call Him “all~mighty.” The unexamined false premise that gave rise to our question was the notion that gifts are always meant to fulfill needs. That is not always true. Among the other reasons we give gifts is something we call “gratitude”

Gratitude has very little to do with a recipient^ needs. Be­cause this is SO, it is not crucial thatgifis of gratitude be expensive

or abundant But it is important that one give his best. The gift might be as simple as a single rose picked from your garden, but it will be the best of those roses. Anything less fads to say what you want it to say.

Recently, a student of mine phoned to discuss a gift that the dass was planning to give me. Usually such end-of-year gifts are meant to be surprises, but this student broke the rules and figured that he, on behalf of the dass, would just ask me what I wanted. He made an interesting stipulation, though. My laptop had been stolen the week before, and he remarked, “Frankly, we could just buy you another laptop, but we know you’ll get that for yourself one way or the other. We want to give you something special, so how about a gift certificate for a gourmet dinner and tickets to a terrific new play for you and your wife?”

When a gift is meant to express gratitude, it’s not really about fulfilling the needs of the recipient. The thing I needed most was a new laptop. But, unlucky fer me, that was beside the point. The gift needed to be special, and a laptop was simply too pedestrian to qualify. Strangely, but perhaps appropriately, the “specialness” of the gift - at least in the mind of this student - seems to have had an inverse relationship to how much I needed it. Instead, “only the finest" - the gourmet meal and tickets to the play - would do.

Expressions of gratitude such as these can help build re­lationships. Ironically, though, not all gifts are so constructive. When a gift masquerades as gratitude but is really a glppfie^ip- surance policy, it doesn’t help our relationship with the recipient onefitgehft

God and the Heavenly Cookie Jar Earlier, in chapter five, we saw that Cain derives his name, Kayin, from Eves declaration of awe at his birth. Wealgo saw that Cain, through farming, actualizes his name. He, like his mother before him, devotes himself to the thrilling creation of new life •in his case, seedlings - in partnership with God Yet Сајд, in offerin g a gift to his Divine partner, chooses to give something that is mergiy

i>6

average. Why would he do that? Is Cain giving a free-flowing gift of unmitigated gratitude, or is he giving a calculated bargaining chip? Is it about “what can I give” or “how much can I afford?"

Remember, there was a potentially dark side to Eve’s dedara- tion. She was not just “creator” but “acquirer,” and in her exalted partnership with God, it was not entirely clear who was the ve­hicle for whose creativity. Eve’s difficulty is perhaps compounded in the next generation by her son Cain. If Eve’s challenge was to think with integrity, to maintain cognizance of her role as junior partner with the Divine, maybe her son’s challenge was to act with integrity - to relate to. the Almighty from ajposition.of gratitude, not bribery. And perhapsitwas here that he failed.

Beyond Logic

If this was the root of Cain’s failure, his behavior was certainly understandable, even logical. Bargaining chips are more rational than free-flowing gratitude. After all, God is very powerful. He holds the keys to the Great Heavenly Cookie Jar, and we all want what’s in that iar. But if we are not careful, the need to get those things can loom larger and larger until this need crowds every­thing else out.

Ultimately, when the gift you give is little more than a spiri- tual insurance policy to make sure you get what you want from God, you may, ironically, be creating distance with that gift, not i doseness. The nature of this distance is something we have yet to explore, but for now, suffice it to say that when a recipient re­fuses such a gift, what he is really saying is, “Try again - you’re not in the insurance business. This isn’t what our relationship is meant to be about.”

And that, in effect, is what God is felling Cain by rejecting his offering. But the Almighty does not just reject Cain’s offering. God also provides Cain some words of guidance to accompany that rejection. The meaning\_ofJthis guidance, though, is madden­ingly elusive. Peciphering God’s words to Cain is therefore the next task that lies before us.

**^ Chapter Nine**

Cain and the Kitten

J

Hust before Cain goes for that feteful stroll in the fields with his ■brother, the Almighty speaks to him. This is what God says:

“Why are you angry and why has your face fallen? Is it not the case that if you do well, then lift up! And if you don’t do well, then sin lies crouching at the door, its desire is unto you, and you can rulerQverit.” (Genesis 4:6-7)

What do these cryptic words mean? And, whatever they mean, why is it that Cain needs to hear them right now?

Beyond Brownie Points

A cursory glance at the words might lead you to believe that God’s speech is a standard-issue religious exhortation to be a better per­son, something along the lines of: "You’d better be nice! If you are, God will reward you. But if you’re mean, He’ll punish you.” Yet it seems that something more complex is going on. For while God does talk about two alternatives that lie before Cain - a fork in the road where he can choose either good or its opposite - still, what

God says next is enigmatic and has little in common with conven­tional “brownie points vs. fire-and-brimstone” style thinking.

Hist, the Lord never suggests to Cain that he will be rewarded for good conduct The text says something else entirely, that if Cain “does well,1” then, "lift ирГ Now what precisely this means is a very good question - we’ll get back to it - but it doesn’t sound as if God is promising Cain a tangible reward for doing, the right thing. Something else is going on.

And lets proceed a bit further. What exactly will happen to Cain if he chooses the other path, if he doesn’t “do well”? You might have expected God to speak about punishments here - if not full-fledged warnings of fire and brimstone, then at least some sort of repercussion to discourage bad behavior. Instead, though, God says something tantalizing, but a bit confusing: “If you do not do weO, sin lies crouching at the door

Now, what exactly does that mean? Whatever it'Jheans, it doesn't sound like God is imposing a punishment. If anything, it sounds like God is saying that Cain, by choosing evil, will some­how become vulnerable to sin. Sin will be like a crouching beast ready to pounce and overcome him. But that idea is itself puz- ziing. For if Cain chooses evil - well, that itself is a sin, isn’t it? So why say vulnerability to sin is a consequence? The verse seems to have it backwards, so?

Talking Cain Off the Bridge

So we have some difficulties in understanding God’s words here, and well get back to these issues; but, in the meantime, let’s not lose sight of the forest for the trees. Bottom line, what seems to be the overall message of the speech? What is the general tone of the Almighty’\* words? What is God “more or less” saying?

Weil, given the placement of this speech - it occurs one sen­tence before Cain murders his brother - it seems logical that the Lord may have been trying to talk Cain off the bridge, as it were. The Almighty was surely aware of the violence of which Cain was capable. Perhaps the speech was a last attempt to rouse Cain into

seeing an alternative course of action beside the dark path lying ominously before him.

But if the speech is an attempt to talk Cain off the bridge, God’s tactics seem puzzling. T**he verse t**ells us that Cain was angry and he was crestfaUgn. WelL. if **someone** youknew were angry and crestfallen and you were trying to get them to reconsider some **kind of disa**strous, i**rrever**sible step they were about to take,how wou**ld you g**o **ab**out it? What kind of tone would you adopt?

Speaking for myself, I would probably try to sound empa- thetic and reassuring. “It’s okay; I understand how you feel; it must be hard” - something along those lines. But that is hardly the tone of God’s speech. **Instead, God forcefully** ch**alleng**es C**am. As a m**at­**ter of fact, He goes as fa**r **as to questio**n Cains right to f**eel th**e way h**e does: “Wh**y are you angry and why has your face fallen?”

When I was growing up, I was often told, “You can’t help how you feel, but you can help what you do about it.” If you fed angry, fine; but you don’t have to act on that anger. **In the w**ords **of His** speech^ though, The Almighty seems io take issue with that **advice**. **Ap**parently, **Cain** шп hejp how he feels about it Cain is crestfallen, and he is angry - but he shouldn’t be. His perspective **needs to change**.

**Why is it so vital that Cain** abandon his current set of fed- ingff? Be**cau**se, I think, those feelings indicate something- They i**ndica**te that Cain has misinterpreted what has gone on between **himse**lf and God, And only by correcting his view of the situation will Cain be able to steer himself away from a course that leads straight to murder.

How Do You Change Your Feelings?

Anger and depression make good bed-fellows; they often go to­gether. Each is basically a passive emotional response. Anger and depression both take for granted that the source of our woes is located outside ourselves, that we have been betrayed by others, or have been victimized by forces beyond our control. And while this may sometimes be the case, it can also be an exaggeration. More

often than not, we do have choices available to us, even if we are not always prepared to recognize them. Once we see the choices, our anger and depression begin to evaporate.

Harriett Lemers book, The Dance of Anger[[11]](#footnote-11), paints a sce­nario that nicely illustrates the point. It goes more or less like this. Imagine you and your roommate have a pet. For our purposes, let’s say its a kitten.One night the kitten wakes you with some strange meowing. It is two-thirty in the morning, and you are concerned. You turn to your roommate, and a conversation ensues between the two of you that goes roughly like this:

you: “She really doesn’t sound right. I think we should call the vet”

roommate: “What do you Mean, call the vet? It’s the middle of the night!

you: “I don’t know. She really sounds pretty bad. I think we should call the vet..

roommate: “Look, just go backto sleep. She probably swal­lowed a hairbalL”

you: “Are you sure we shouldn’t just call the vet?”

roommate: “Good night!”

You both go back to sleep, and when you wake up in the morning, the kitten is dead.

Now take a deep breath and ask yourself: how are you go­ing to feel toward your roommate when morning comes and you **diteove**r the lifeless kitten lying next to your bed? You are likely **to** be enraged: “It’s all your fault! Here I was, telling you that we should take the kitten to the vet, and all you could think about was getting a good night’s sleep! And now the kitten is dead.” Whether you like it or not, though, the reality is **otherwis**e. You were not the victim of circumstances **beyond your con**tr**o**l.

You were not betrayed by your sleep-seeking roommate. You had free will There were choices ppm to ypy, choices you refused to grab hold of. No one forced you to pet permission from ynnr roommate before calling the vet You could have called had you wanted to.If you feel angry or depressed hem it is because you choose to see yourself as heJ^Jess,ajiactimr)f yourlousy iosensi- five roommate. But in fact you weren’t a victim at all.

Feeling angry, Cain locafes the source of his problem outside ^himself, in God. No one can control God, and as long as that s the problem, you’re nothing but a victim. But that wasn’t the gggfc itvThaj^g^his problem lay entirely iri the choices Cain him- selfwas making, in the nature of the relationship he was building with God, and this was a realm entirely within hk mntrn) The first Step off the bridge, then, is letting go of anger and depression and reclaiming this element of control.

The Perils of Neutrality

So all in all, Cain is being given an antidote to his feelings of an­ger and depression. You have choices, God says, the ball is in your court. “If vou do well,, then, lift up!” What had been downcast before - Cakfe face (“Why has your face fallen...") - can now be raised. Qaan will be able to look himself in the eye, as it were, when he stares at the mirror in the morning. When we seize our power to act in a positive way, webegin to lift up our faces again in the ultimate gesture of self-respect

Of course, when choices are available, there is always die op- tlonof choosing poorly too: “And if you don’t do well, then sin lies crouching at the door...” Earlier, we got stuck on this phrase. How could the consequence of sin be vulnerability to sin? But when the verse talks about “not doing wellT who says that’s the same §s committing a s.Ul2 After all, the text doesn’t say: “If you do evil," then sin lies crouching at the door; instead, it says “if you do not do well.” Not doinggood isrft th&jsame tijjingas.doing evij. It is simply being neutral. Maybe God is saying something like the following:

Why has your face fallen? If you are active, if you seek out the good - you can lift up your face. And if you are neutral - if you do not act positively - you can’t tread water. While be- ing neutral is not itself an evil, it does leave you vulnerable to evil. Sin lies crouching at the doonand even the most well- intentioned neutral party can still become its prey.

An interesting speech, we might conclude. And let’s even grant for the moment that we are right in interpreting it this way. We still have yet to address a nagging question: why does Cain need to hear this right now? It’s all very nice, these words about neutrality and activism, about vulnerability to sin, It sure seems like an inspiring thing to put in the Bible somewhere, maybe tucked comfortably into a suitable comer of Deuteronomy. But what is it doing right here, right now? Beyond the general idea that Cain can act if he chooses to, how are these words about neutrality and vulnerability uniquely relevant to Cain and to the Situation in which he finds himself?

Back to Eden

In the coming pages, we’ll explore that issue and begin to put into place the final pieces of our look at this story. But first, let me leave you with a little tip.

We discussed earlier the striking montage of connections ex­isting between the Cain and Abel story and the story of humanity’s expulsion from Eden. Both Adam and Cain hear the JDivine ques- tion, “Ayeh?" Both Adam and Cain express fear and hide from God. Both Adam and Cain suffer exile. And both Adam and Cain are condemned to experience difficulty farming. But the truth is that the connections between the Cain story and the aftermath of the Tree of Knowledge do not end even there, There remains one final parallel hidden within the text of the speech we have just studied. If you look carefully at that speech, you’ll realize that an entire section of it is lifted virtually verbatim from words that God had once told someone else, not thirty verses earlier.

Of all the Eden connections we have seen thus far, this one is the most shocking and disturbing, at least when you first see it. Ifyou find the parallel, you’ll know exactly what fm talking about Yet it is in the mystery of this last Eden connection that 1ft will finally learn the full import of what God told Cam in the moments before Abel’s murder.

**q ’ Chapter Ten**

Can Desire Be Divorced from Need?

I

Hhave a favor to ask of you. It is an unusual request, but 1 have my reasons, trust me, Ihe request is this:

*If you happen to be flipping through this book and have opened randomly to this chapter, you need to promise me that you'll read the whole thing, all the way to the end. If you can’t make that commitment, I am going to ask you to stop right here. [[12]](#footnote-12)*

are. Each verse on its own seems fairly innocuous. But when ypn put them together, they are positively combustible. In reality I think the verses provide only an excuse, not real evidence, for the charge that the Bible denigrates women. But that’s why I need you to keep reading past the middle of this chapter. If you are go­ing to let me show you the explosive part, you owe it to me and to yourself, to think carefully about what the words really mean. When I’ve had my say, take some time to think about it, and then you can make up your own mind.

Okay, so we have a deal? If you’re with me this far, I’ll as­sume that we do.

A Fearsome Analogy

I warned earlier that there was one final parallel to the world of Eden tucked away in the Cain story. It appears within God’s speech to Cain. Part of this speech has been said before, back in Eden, not thirty verses earlier. Can you find what I am talking about? listen again to the words of God’s speech to Cain. As you do, ask yourself “Where have I heard these words before?”

Why are you angry and why has your face fallen? Is it not the case that if you do well, then lift up! And if you don’t do well, then sin lies crouching at the door, its desire is unto you, yet you can rule over it

The telltale words are the very last ones:

*“...its desire is unto you, yet you <Ш1 rule oye^r it”*

This concluding phrase is lifted almost verbatim from some­thing God said earlier, just after the man and his wife ate from the Tree of Knowledge. The original words are troubling enough on their own. But when you take into account their reappearance in the Cain story, they become downright fearsome.

The first time these words appear, God is speaking to Eve.

After telling her that she will experience pain in childbirth, He concludes by saying to her:

*“...your desire will be to your husband, yet he can ride oyer*

you” (Genesis 3:16)

Do you hear the resemblance? God says to Eve that her de­sire will be to her husband, yet he can rule over her. That’s bad enough for us modern types. But then God says to Cain, thirty verses later, that the Evil Inclination's desire is to Cain, yet Cain can rule over it.

Well, that just takes the cake, doesn’t it? I mean the Bible seems to be suggesting some sort of analogy here. And it’s a pro­foundly ^sturbing analogy at that Those of you who took the sats to get into college are no doubt familiar with these kinds of analogies. If you add it up, it sounds like Cain is analogous to Adam, and Eve is analogous to - make sure you are sitting down for this - Cain’s Evil Inclination.

It seems too horrible to believe.

When It's Too Good to Be True...

An old adage says that when something seems too good to be true, it usually is. In this case, I think the converse is also true - when something seems too horrible to believe, it sometimes is exactly that - not to be believed.

In this vein, I think some healthy skepticism is in order. Is it really conceivable that the Bible considers Eve - womankind - tantamount to “sin,” the anthropomorphic tide given by the verse to Cain’s Evil Inclination? Is the Torah viewing femininity as some evil force threatening to\_overtake the masculine, something men must keep at bay lest it devour them? Again, it seems too horrible to believe. But what, then, is the Torah trying to say to us with its not-so-subtle link between one phrase and the other?

Okay, just in case you were wondering, this is the part where you’re not supposed to stop reading. The fact is that we’ve

committed a logical error in interpreting the analogy.Jn general, analogies are notoriously easy to misinterpret - that, after all, is why they put them on the sats - and this analogy is no exception. Let’s step back, take a deep breath, and try again.

What ifl told you that whales desperately need plankton and that cars desperately need gasoline? Both these statements are true, and we might say that an analogy exists between them. But §t bear with me here - it does not follow from this that whales are' basi­cally the same as cars or that plankton is pretty much identical to gasoline. Marine biologists would surely be offended by-that conclusion. Rather, what follows is that the relatianshipJaetween whales and plantaon is similar to the relationship between oay and gasoline. In each case, the latter provides the fuel thafemakes the former go.

And so it is with our analogy. Although both verses ;use simi­lar language, it does not follow that Cain is like Adam-, nor does it follow that Eve is like Cain’s Evil Inclination. Rather, what.fol- lows is that the relationship between Adam and Eve i oncmSiie- broadly, between man and woman - is analogous on some level to the relationship that Cain is asked to develop with his Еуј1Ш& dination. And while this might not seem much better than the previous alternative, hang in here. We’re just beginning to un­cover what’s going on.

The Four Primal Desires

Over a thousand years ago, the Rabbis of the Midrash noticed the analogy we have been wrestling with, and they had something quite intriguing to say about it They observed that the Bible uses the Hebrew term teshukah (desire) in both verses we have been discussing. In tracing the various scriptural occurrences of this word, Ље Sages recognized a pattern. Here is what they had to say:

“There are four {basic] teshukot in the world. The teshukah of Eve for Adam, the teshukah of the Evil Inclination for

iM-

Cain, the teshukah of rain for land, and the teshukah of the

Master of the Universe for humanity? (Midrash Rabbah on

Genesis, 20:7)

The Sages cite additional verses (which I have not reproduced here) to substantiate each one of these conclusions, but let’s focus just these four statements. What are foe Rabbis really saying?

It seems to me that they are defining foe word “teshukah” - and making a sweeping, almost radical, statement in foe process. Look carefully at the four examples they give: foe desire of Eve for Adam, of the Evil Inclination for Cain, of rain for land, and Iff God for humanity j and see if you can isolate a common de­nominator among them.

While you are mulling that over, you might notice that some of the desires indicated by foe Rabbis don’t sound much like de­sites-at all. Lets look, for example, at the last two: foe desire of rain for land and the desire of the Almighty for humanity. If you were given the words “rain” and “land,” and someone asked you, ШМЈЈШМ these two ‘desires’ the other,” what would you say?

I\* jyould say “-land” is» the'One with foe desire. Land needs rain ^nourish its crops; rain doesn’t need land at alL And foe same holds for “God” and “humanity” A basic tenet of theology states that God is a perfect Being who has no needs at alL So, if we are contemplating God and humans, if anything, it should be humanity that desires God, Why do the Sages have it foe other way around?

When Desire is Divorced from Need I would argue that the Sages define teshukah as something entirely different from what we usually think of when we use foe word “desire? When you and I normally talk about desire, we associate desire with “need? Think about the synonyms we use for desire. When we desire a new car, we say, “I need a new car," or “I want a new car? Both “need" and “want” are connected to the idea of “lack.” When I am wanting or needful, I am missing something;

when I get it, that hole in my life is filled, and my want or need is satisfied. Usually when we talk about desire, we are really talking about getting needs fulfilled.

The question you should contemplate is this: Is that the only kind of desire there is in this world? Or, perhaps, is “desire” a larger concept than this? Is there a desire that is not based on a sense of need, that doesn’t come from some kind of lack that I have? If all my needs and wants were taken care of, would that be it? Or- could I still have some sense of desire?

I think the Sages are answering that question With a resound­ing, “Yes!” Yes, it is possible to desire something;even, whenttqi don’t need anything. Rain doesn’t need land a whit, but somehow it still “desires” land. God doesn’t need people a whit either, but somehow, He still desires them. The Sages are arguing, 'I ffiunk, that teshukah is a code name for this special kincLof-desire., And it is this very kind of desire, this teshukah, that the feminine has for the masculine. And that the Evil Inclination, whatever that is. has for Cain.

So what, exactly, is the essential nature of teshukah? How are we to understand a desjre that is divorced from need? And how does this shed light on the two primal teshukahs under dis­cussion - the “desire” of the feminine for the masculine, and the “desire" of the Evil Inclination for Cain?

That’s exactly what we’ll look at in just a moment. But first, a little background...

^ Chapter Eleven

The Case of the Laughing Rabbi

W

hy did God create the world?

It’s not just an idle, philosophical question. From a religious standpoint, this innocent, child-like query packs a big theological wallop. For if God is a perfect Being, a Being who has no needs, then why would God bother creating a universe? What could a universe possibly give to a Being who doesn’t need anything at all?

In the beginning of the eighteenth century, a thinker by the name of Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto proposed what has be­come a classic answer to this dilemma. His answer is deceptively simple. Luzzatto said that God created the world in order to be capable of love.

The words seem clichdd, sort of like the "God is Love” bumper sticker you might see plastered to the back of someone’s rusting Volkswagon Beetle. But Luzzatto lived long before the age of the Beetle, and he meant what he said seriously, not as a cliche. His argument goes as follows:

One of the axioms that most religions, Judaism included, accept about God is that God is good. But those are just words, What does it actually mean to be good? One of the things it means, Luzzatto says, is that one acts to benefit others. If there is no world, though, then there are no others that God can benefit. He exists alone in numinous solitude. God acted to create a world so that there would be other beings existing besides Himself, beings upon whom He could bestow goodness.

In short, God created the world because goodness de­manded it.

The Laughing Rabbi

Now, for many years I didn’t have the foggiest idea what Luzzatto was talking about I had problems with it. Let’s leave aside the question of suffering for a moment (why, in a world created out of love, there is so much hurt and pain); let’s assume that there are answers to that question out there somewhere. I was trou­bled by an even more fundamental difficulty. How had Luzzatto solved anything? If God is not supposed to have any needs, then He shouldn’t have a need to do good, to bestow kindness, eithbR If God has this need, it puts us right back where we StaEtedffrom: How could a perfect Being have needs? How could He be.mSs^ ing something?

I vividly remember making this point once to the dean of the yeshiva where I studied. The dean’s name was Rabbi l&gikov Weinberg, may he rest in peace, and I was sitting on a couch in his office arguing my case as forcefully as I could. I gave this ex­ample to illustrate my point Let’s say a woman saves her child from death by throwing herself in front of an oncoming car to shield him. She walks away with injuries, but none as pro­found as the hurt she would have felt had she allowed her child to die. So, in the final analysis, she acted out of need, didn’t she?

I was arguing, really, that there was no such thing as pure altruism - acting solely for the benefit of others. Every altruistic

act expresses a need within the person doing it? therefore, it is foe doer, not just the receiver, who benefits from it

When I finished making my point, I awaited Rabbi Wein­berg's response. As best as I can remember the conversation, he didn’t answer me. Instead, he just sat across from me, and then he started laughing. When my attempts to get him to elaborate failed, he finally spoke; One day, he said, I would understand, and then, with a good natured nod, he beckoned me to the (foot Our meeting was'over.

Solving the Case of the Laughing Rabbi It has taken me a while to understand the meaning of Rabbi Weinberg’s laughter, but I think I finally see what he was getting at He was alluding to the point I left you to ponder at the end of the last chapter, where Lsuggesferl that the Sages of the Mirfrash aw teshukah as a desire not based upon need. This idea seems like an oxymoron: surely all desires stem from my not having something Iftyant. Yet there really are radically different desires out there in tfre. world; desires that come feomlM sense of lack whatsoever. Where do they come from, and what makes them tick?

Ironically. enough, they come from the very opposite of “need.” They come from a sense of fullness. To give an .analogy, they express not the desire of the half empty glass to be full, but the desire of a full glass to overflow.

Desires based on fullness are every bit as real as those based OfljaggcLln fact.^onemiighL argue, they are felt even more in- tenselv than those based on need. Consider the following state­ment made by the Rabbis of the Talmud: “More than the calf wants to suckle, the mother wants to nurse” (Babylonian Talmud, Pesackim ma).

Both the calf and the mother have desires. The calf is miss­ing something; it needs nutrition from its mother. The mother, on the other hand, needs nothing. Nevertheless, it is her desire that is the stronger one. Desires based upon fullness dwarf in passion and intensity mere need-based desires.

The Nature of Love; the Essence of Teaching

To better grasp the notion of a “fullness-based” desire, let’s look

at an example or two.

To begin with, what do we mean when we talk about love? Different people mean different things. Some men who say, “I love her” really mean “She fulfills my needs rather nicely.” She laughs at my jokes, cooks great meals, and makes me feel comfortable. But love is not just about being fed and feeling understood. On a higher plane, love is not just about what I need, but what I can give. Love means not just that I’m happy you serve my needs, but that I appreciate who you are in and of yourself, independent of what I get from you. When I love in that way, my love comes not from lack but from fullness. My affection for you doesn’t come solely from your ability to fill the holes in my personality, but from the desire of a mature human being to give what he can to someone he admires and values.

A second example of this kind of desire is the impulse to teach. The Sages of the Talmud have nasty things to say about people who study their whole lives but never teach others. Why? I’ll give you a theory. The Hebrew verb “to teach” (le’lamed) is identical to the verb “to study” (lilmod), except that the former, “to teach,” is the intensive form of the verb (what’s known as its piel conjugation).\* When you stop to think about it, this says some­thing profound about what it means to teach. Teaching is nothing but “studying intensively.” When someone is so passionate about what he is studying that he can’t help but overflow and share his learning with others - well, that’s teaching.

Since teaching is just a further point on a continuum that begins with studying, it follows that when one studies and studies, ■ Piel verbs are the same as their regular counterparts, just more intense ver­sions of them. For example: Lishbor means “to break”; le’shaber, the piel form, means “to smash.”

but never teaches, something is broken inside. Study that never flowers into teaching is, somehow, not the real thing.

Male and Female Desire

There are four primal teshukahs in the world, say the Sages. There are four beings full of life-force, seeking to overflow and share that gift of life with others. One of those beings is God. It should come as no surprise that a perfect Being would experience rather intensely the desire we call teshukah. The Almighty loves, not be­cause He is needy but because He is full. He wants to share that fullness with others. And to that end, He created a world.

Another “being” possessed of life-force is rain. The land is parched without rain, the land needs rain - but it is rain that ex­periences teshukah for land. Rain wants to give land what it can. Rain becomes meaningful because of its ability to nourish and to share itself with land. Without land, rain is frustrated, restless. The desire of rain to give life to land is intense.

Another great teshukah in the world, say the Sages, is the desire of the feminine for the masculine. What is the nature of this desire?

To be sure, both men and women desire one another, but they do so for different reasons. Let’s talk about men. In traditional Jew­ish marriage, a man gives a ring to a woman, not the other way around. The reason is that a biblical verse (Deuteronomy 22:13) describes the man as the active partner, who “takes” a woman as his wife. Now this might strike some as sexist, but I don’t think the ancient Sages meant it that way. Long ago, the Sages of the Talmud wondered about this verse in Deuteronomy. Why, they asked, does the Torah state “when a man shall take a woman..Why is he, not she, cast as the active partner in marriage and courtship?

Here is their answer: “It is comparable to a person who lost something. Who goes searching after whom? I would say: ‘The person who lost something searches after that which they lost’” (Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 3b).

The Sages are alluding to something in this cryptic statement. Remember, the verse in Deuteronomy talks about a man “taking” a woman. If you search Genesis for some of the very first occur- rences of. the word “take”-in the Bible., .vou will come across the following verse:

And [the Lord] took one of Adam’s ribs, closed tip his skin,

and built [the rib] he had taken from man into woman...

(Genesis 2^20-21)

When a man “takes” a woman in marriage, what he is really doing is taking bade his lost rib. The person experiencing a loss'' is the one who searches for what was lost. The masculine desires the feminine because a man understands, on some basfeleyel, that he is missing his lost feminine side, and he is seeking јшЈШа unite with her.

The feminine desires the masculine for other reasons. The feminine does not have, imprinted on her soul, the senseJhat she is missing something without a man.\_ Since woman was cre­ated as a whole being, she does not experience that same, mas­culine sense of lack within herself. Instead, the feminine clmres the masculine out of teshukah The feminine - like rain and like God - embodies a mysterious life force, and she seeks to give that gift to the masculine.

The Talmud takes for granted that, generally speaking, women want to get married more than men do (Babylonian Talmud, Ketubbot 75a). This assumption should not surprise us. Desires based upon fullness are always more intense than desires based merely upon lack.

"Its Desire Is unto You..."

We are now, I think, in a position to understand what God was saying to Cain in the moments before he murdered Abel. He was talking to Cain about his Evil Inclination, and he was telling him something both startling and profound: “There is a fourth primal

teshukah in the world. It is the teshukah, Cain, that your Evi In- has for you.”

What God was telling Cain forces us to redefine our notion of the Evil Inclination. When we think of the Evil hidiaation, we tend to think of something, well, evil. We imagine some sort of devil bent on getting |j||to stray, or a dark part of our soul try­ing to corrupt us. But that’s not how God portrays it here. Is it possible that the Evil Inclination, like the Almighty Himself, like rain, like femininity, has a powerful life forceto share? That it is a neutral, even benevolent force? It seems paradoxical Why, then, Would we calltit 'evil”?;

Ipimthe coming-pages-we will examine more carefully this no­tion of the Evil Inclination, and the relationship that God warns Caiii fo build with it. In SO doing. I think we will finally under- stand why the story of Cain is so intimately related to the Tree of Knowledge, and why the unique challenges facing Cain arenoth- ing more than its misbegotten fiuits.

**^ Chapter Twelve**

Cain, Creativity and the Spice of Life

E

Hve hears words whose echo will later speak to her son, Cain: f “Youfcrteshukah shall be to your husband, yet he can rule over you.. .".(Genesis 3:16). The end of the sentence sounds hash, and one wonders whether over the centuries it was used by au- |@dteitarian husbands to jimsMily the use of an iron hand at home. But even if the verse may have been used that way, that doesn’t mean this is what it really means. In Hebrew, the verb “rale over” - moshel - is spelled identically to the noun mashed, a word that means “parable.” The similarity suggests a relationship between “moshel” and “mashal,” between “ruling over something” and “parables,” What might this be?

Why Parables Rule

Why do people tell parables? Parables aren’t just stories. They are glories meant to interpret reality. Something happens, and it seems Inexplicable. When I try to make sense of what occurred, I may tell a story, a parable, which I present as comparable in some im­portant way to what happened.

In that sense, parables "rule” over experience. An experience in and of itself is blind and raw. It comprises an almost infinite array of tiny events and subtleties and can be viewed in a myriad of ways. A good parable helps us sort out what is essential from what is incidental, A parable takes, a series of events and directs our understanding^ them in a particular way.

What does a good “ruler” do? He takes the raw energy of the nation he is privileged to lead anddirects it toward certain ends. The energy of a nation is a blindjbrcesit can be used in an infinite variety of ways. In submitting a budget proposal to Congress, a president is in feet setting an agenda. He is submitting his vision of where the country ought to be going together with his intention to direct the energy of the nation - its wealth - toward specific and, one hopes, productive ends. A ruler takes.raw-&nergfc.and decides how to make wise use of it

If it is the teshukalC the desne, nf \*Hp feminine ,to establish a relationship with the masculine and share her life-force with him, the masculine must responsibly decide what he will do with this gift. Newly empowered by Ms union with woman, man find's himself wondering what he will do with Ms Me, how he^will di- r^ thispowerful energy outside the immediate confines of their personal relaiionsMp. He must decide on goals that productively utilize what has been entrusted to Him.

Looking Past the Devil in the Bright Red Suit The echo of these ideas - of teshukah and moshel, of life-force and its direction - re-appears in Genesis, shortly after this discussion of Adam and Eve, when God speaks to Cain about his Evil Incli­nation: “Its teshukah will be for you, yet you can rule over it,. I We are used to thinking nf the Evil Inclination as, well, evil. That js oertainly understandable considering its narne. But the Sages of the Midrash had other ideas. They included the Evil In­clination among the four primal forces that experience “teshukah,” a desire bom not of lack but of fullness. They appear to have envi-

sioned the Evil Inclination as a life force that overflows and then seeks to share itself.

In Part One, we discussed how the Evil Inclination is often conceived as something vaguely metaphysical nr blatantly child­ish, We might picture a devil dressed up in a bright red suit, com­plete with horns and tail, or an angel with a little too much time on his hands who sits above our left shoulder and whispers bad advice in our ears. But in real life, what is this thing we call the Evillnclination?

Again, the Midrash offers a clue. According to the Bible, When the Almighty looked back on the whole of creation, He declared, “Behold, it was very good.” The Rabbis of the Midrash saw this as a pronouncement about the goodness of the entirety of creation, even its apparently unsavory parts: and behold, it

was very good’; this refers to the Evil Inclination.” The comment is astounding, but the. Rabbis immediately clarify what they mean by raising the obvious objection:

Can the Evil Inclination really be classified as “very good”? It seems impossible! Yet, were it not for the Evil Inclination, a . man would not build a house and would not marry a woman; he would not have children and would not engage in busi­ness. .. (Midrash Rabbah on Genesis, 9.7)

The Evil Inclination, in real life, is neither more nor less than our passions, the desires that fuel us and make us go. These desires, far from being inherently evil, are an essential part of our human­ity, A man without passion builds no house and never marries. Cut off from ambition, he in the end builds nothing worthwhile out of his life.

Of Cars and Steering Wheels

So if the Evil Inclination is so good, why is it so bad ? That J think, is precisely what God was trying to explain to Cain: “Its teshukah

is to you, yet you can rule over it” Passions are not evil in and of themselves. They constitute apowerful, inherentlybenign life force, whose only desire, as it were, is to establish a relationship with you. They want to overflow, to.give of themselves to you. But the power of these passions is awesome^ and awesome power left raw and undirected can indeed lead to great evil.

if Cain “3oeswelI,” if Ee directs his passions properly, then “lift up!” - he can lift up his face and look at himself in the mirror in the morning. But if he does not do well - if hy fails to direct these passions, if he stays neutral and lets them run wild in his soul - well, that itself may not be a sin, but sin lies crouchim at the door. It's only a matter of time hefnre\_the engjne we\_calLpas- sion, cut off from the steering wheel meant to guide it, drives its rider over the nearest diff.

The responsibility thus devolves upon Cain to “rule” hjs.pas- sions: not to crush them, but to direct their power and energy as a rider directs the energy of the nation he governs. A car isrft a car if you destroy the engine. But its only a safe vehicle if you decide to use the steering wheel

Why Now?

Why did God make this speech right here, right now? A talk about passion, steering wheels, and the dangers of neutrality is all very fine, but what does it have to do with what Cain is struggling with right now? I think we can assume that when the Almighty spoke the words He did to Cain, He was not just looking for an oppor­tunity to make a good speech. Rather, He was talking directly and personally to Cain. Cain is stung by God’s rejection of his offering and is contemplating harm against his brother. What guidance is this speech offering him? It is time to return to the mysterious linkage the Bible creates between this story, the episode of Cain and Abel, and the saga of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

We have discussed how the language describing the expulsion from Eden is vividly recreated in the verses detailing the aftermath of Abels murder. God asks both Adam and Cain the very same

"ayeh” question; Adam hides from God, and so does Cain; Adam suffers exile and difficulty in farming, and so does Cain. These ideas are not merely repeated from story to story; they intensify from story to story as well. With Adam, God quests after a tem­porarily missing person (Adam); with Cain, He quests after a permanently missing one (Abel). Adam hides momentarily; Cain forever. Adam is exiled, but can find a new home elsewhere; Cain is condemned never to call anywhere home.

The pattern of similarity and intensification suggests a basic commonality m..the.stor.ies It suggests that the story of Cain and Abel is a farther rung on a ladder that begins with the Tree of Knowledge, that the challenges befalling Cain are precisely those we might expect1 in a world where humanity has just partaken from the Tree of Knowledge. But whv is this so? What does a tale about eating some nice-looking Forbidden Fruit have to do with a bout.of sibling rivalry that unfortunately ends in murder?

T^answexJLmajtfQrij^i^Sjji^g. Passion, and its proper role in the human psyche, are the conceptual core of both these stories. TO see^how- јМшшо will require a short journey back into terri­tory we covered in Part One. Let’s refresh our memories.

Who's Afraid of the Big, Bad Snake?

Back in the Garden of Eden, the serpent’s temptation exposed this question: how is humanity meant to relate to the voice of desire, of instinctual passion, found within ourselves? Animals like snakes follow God’s will not by listening to commands but by obeying their passions, bv listening to their natural. God-given instincts and urges. Every time a lioness hunts a gazelle or a grizzly bear plucks a salmon out of an Alaskan river, that animal has followed the voice of God, The snake holds out the possibility ffiat perhaps people should adopt the same approach to their relationship with the Deity: “Even if God said do not eat from the trees of the Gar­den.,. [so what]?”

God may have told you not to eat from the tree, but do you want to? If so, you are faced with a contradiction. Which diyjne

that beats insistently inside you - tb.e voice of instinct, passinn and desire? Speaking for myself, the snake argues, it is not much of a contest For an animal, the voice of desire always reigns su­preme.

In the act of reaching for the Forbidden Fruit, Adam and Eve succumbed to the snake’s argument. As a result, they changed. In eating from the Tree of Desire. Adam and-Eve-took desireunside themselves and began to identify the corerof their selfhoodJn desire. This increased the centrality, and hence the energy, of the engine burning inside of them, but it also introduced an element of imbalance into their identity. When you are driving your car but are sitting on top of the engine instead of behind the steering wheel, how do you guide the car effectively anymore? Splijis the question that Cain and all subsequent inhabitants of the post-Tree world are left to grapple with.

From Eden to Cain

At first glance, the story of Cain and Abel, seems а-водшу tale of sibling rivalry getting tragically out of hand But the storygej^feint so much more than sibling rivalry. Cain is contending witha deep passions force of dizzying power, that wishes sntn-speak. to bond with him and fill him with its life-affirming power. Cain, for his part, must realize that as benevolent and tantalizing as this force is, he is not the same as it; he is distinct from it. He must affirm his identity outside of it, and somehow, he must rule over it. He must direct its power.

What is the name of that passion?

Did you ever wonder why Adam and Eve, in the wake of eating from the Tree of Knowledge, were - of all things - fearful of their nakedness? If they sensed that the desires and passion within themselves were stronger than before, that these were now forces to be feared, why was it specifically their nakedness, their new consciousness of sexuality that they feared? There are other passions in the world Why is sexuality singled out?

TtiP answer. T think, is that thfLltee. of Knowledge was not fatt about passion in generaL It was about a particular kind of passion:

The snake argued to Eve: “God ate from this tree and cre­ated the world. He doesn’t want you to eat from it, for if you do, you will be empowered to create worlds, too. Everyone knows that a craftsman hates his competitors...” (Midrash Rabbah on Genesis. 10:4!

According to the 2vlidrash, J[he .Xree of Knowledge was about the mysterious and sublime drive to create.

In the realm of human biology, creativity expresses itself in sexuality. Hence, immediately after eating from the tree, Adam and Eve fear their nakedness. They feel dwarfed by this force called sexuality. But creativity expresses itself in other realms, ЈодЈЗпЈ of those realms is agriculture. In agriculture, creativity expresses ltselfas the desire to plant

Sexuality and Planting

Gain, the first living product of the miracle we call human sexual- • ity the child of a mother who exclaims in ecstasy that she has ac­quired1 a1 man with God - chooses to become a farmer. We argued earlier that this is not a coincidence. Cain devotes his life to cre­ation with land, just as his mother has created with her womb.

The drive to create - or even better, the drive to create in partnership with God - mav bethe .deepest,passion we human beings ran know. This passion is so deep and suhlime that it is quite nearly godly. As our friend the snake once said, if you eat from the tree, “you shall be as gods, knowing good and evil” (Gen­esis 3:4),

But ironically, this satpc passion can, also be the source of grgpt evilTIndeed, as we explained previously, "Evil Inclination” is only an approximate translation. The original Hebrew words arc 1 rntrar kam\* the ГСгт ‘ypt7f.r” ^mfog lrQm\_“ptzar” which means

“to create.” Rendered literally the Evil JpcIina^^atbottorTi. seems to be nothing mo^ethan the drive tn create gone awry.

What the Almighty was telling Cain, I think, is that even a passion as holy as the drive to join with God in acts of creation must still be channeled. As ironic as it sounds, this apparently spir- itual drive is potentially destructive. Jt can drive a wedge between humans and the source of all creativity. God Himself. Whether creativity becomes holy or destructive mostly depends on who is doing the driving: the engine or the steering wheel.

What, precisely, does holy creativity look like, and how do you tell the differencebetween it and its fraternal twin, destructive creativity? These are the questions that God’s speech puts before us, front and center. And it is to these questions that we shall re­turn in the coming pages.

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**p Chapter Thirteen**

Of Roses and Triangles

Ztt-s teshukah i&foty,oUf yet you can rule over it**...”**

I

f the “yetzer” of Cairns the drive to create, the passion to plant crops and create in partnership with God, what would it mean јИШтко rule over this? The answer will take us back to the story of Thomas Edison and the glassblower.

I i The glassblower was fired with the passion to create in part­nership with Edison. The crucial question for him was: How would this affect his relationship with Edison? Would it destroy that relationship or enhance dt|Slt would all depend on whether the glassblower could rule over his passion, or whether his pas- .Sj@n would rule over him.

If the glassblower is consumed by his desire to create, if he is held in its thrall - well, that alone is not sinful, but “sin lies crouch­ing at the door,” as it were. The glassblower may find himself view­ing Edison merely as a tool to realize his own creative ambitions. His goal in giving a gift to Edison would thus be litde more than bribery, a bald-faced attempt to ensure that the inventor does not get himself another glassblower.

And so it might be with Cain. When the drive to join God

in the act of creation is left undirected, it can slowly become an obsession, a powerful, gnawing end in itself. When this happens, anything can be sacrificed on its altar - even- ironically. Cain’c relationship with God Himself. If I see God as a necessary in­strument to make my creativity flourish, to let my crops grow, I may relentlessly try to “buy Him off’ As I reach brazenly for the keys to the Heavenly Cookie Jar, Г11 give God plenty of gifts, but gifts of a curiously average quality. I offer to my Heavenly Partner only what is necessary to ensure his continued co-operation in our mutual endeavor.

There, is, however, an alternative. Cain, like the glassblower, has a choice to make. Rather than be controlled by the monumen­tal passion to create with God, he can rule over it He can direct the power of this force. He can direct it toward the heroic stance we call gratitude.

If Cain can but steer his passion, it will become an engine for something profoundly positive. The offering that Cain gives will not be about bribery, but about overwhelming gratitude. It will not be a crass attempt to ensure that the keys to the Heav­enly Cookie Jar always remain comfortably within reach. It will be something infinitely more valuable - a humble expression of appreciation for letting me share in the secret of creation with my Creator, the Creator of AIL

Roses for Dad and Mom

The difference between the two stances, and between die impact each has on the relationship between creature and Creator, could not be more significant.

We can see this when we consider our own relationships with those we create, namely, our children. Here’s a scenario: Sam and his fiancee have just arrived at his parents’ home for their first visit since Sam graduated from medical school. Mom and Dad are flat­tered to notice that the couple has brought them flowers. But what do the flowers mean? Mom and Dad have spent a good deal of toil

and treasure to put Sam through medical schooL If the flowers are expressions of gratitude, if they signify their child’s deeplyfelt recognition of the great gift they have given to him - well, there is nothing that warms a parent’s heart more than this. Such a gift contributes powerfully to the quality of the relationship between parent and child.

But what if the roses are not about gratitude? Sam and his new bride will look to his parents for considerable help in the fu­ture as they struggle through years of internship and residency. What if the flowers are a calculated attempt to keep Mom and Dad happy? What if Sam and his bride are giving a perfunctory aver­age gift that wilLserve nicelv. they hope, as an insurance policy to ensure Dad and Moms continued support?

There is.no greater heartbreak than receiving a gift like this. One suspects it is better to give nothing at all A gift that is a mere insurance policy demeans the relationship between parent and 1 child. It cheapens the natural love of a creator for his offspring by turning that love into a mere commodity to be hoarded, to be squirreled away for a rainy day. Worse, it turns the creator into a mere tool of the child’s creativity, a creativity that ultimately be­comes self-centered and self-serving. Thg creator becomes noth­ing but a pawn in a great chess game that revolves insidiously around the ever-expanding ambitions of the child.

Cain brings the quintessential “average” gift to his Creator, and the Almighty, the Great Parent in the Sky, takes Cain aside to have a little talk with him about all this:

Why are you angry and why has your face fallen? He asks Cain Your anger and depression are out of place, for the ball is entirely in your court: If you do well, if you guide your powerful desire to create along with Me, you can lift up [yourface]. A gift that expresses gratitude will always be accepted by your Creator, anJyou can look yourself in the eye in the mirror after giving it But if you do not do well, if you foil to steer your passion, if you adopt a position of neutrality, then sin lies crouching at the door.

You risk sacrificing our very relationship on the altar of blind cre­ativity. The teshukah of your passion is for you, yet you can rule over it, you can transform its raw power into gratitude, into something that enhances rather than destroys our relationship.

Cain does not listen. He persists in his belief that the source of his problems lies outside of himself, that he has been victim­ized by someone else, anyone else. He cannot kill God for fail- ing to accept his gift - the Almighty is impervious to arrows and spears - so he does the next best thing. He lashes out in a differ­ent direction, killing Abel, the brother whose offering found favor with his Maker

Cains rage, like the surging creativity inside Him, is blind. His act of murder does not appear premeditated; it seems spontane­ous.[[13]](#footnote-13) Indeed, die Sages tell us that Cain killed. inadvertentiy.JHe did not know that his violence would destroy Abel, as-themltimate fruits of physical brutality were, at the time, a great unknown.! No one had ever been killed before. Tragically, Cain is perhaps

being truthful when he tells God that he simply does not know where Abel is anymore. But none of that matters; what is done is done and cannot be taken back. Abels blood cries out from the gmnnd. Creativity has caught up with Cain. The beast is nolonger qouching at the door. It has sprung, devouring both killer and victim within its iaws.

The Core of the Triangle

At long last, we are in a position to see the global picture, the composite portrait painted for us in these first two human dra­mas in the Book of Genesis, the sagas of the Forbidden Fruit and the World’s First Murder. As we have seen, both stories revolve around the proper role of creativity in the psyche of humankind. Failure in one story brought death into the world in theory, while failure in the other brought death into the world in practice. Fail- U|e in each story brought exile, difficulty in farming, and hiding

We. have, seen thatthe. story of Adam and Eve is closely con­nected to the storv of Cain and Abel. The latter doesn't just happen to come after the former; it really is its sequel, conceptually and thematically. A process starts in the first story, and that process takes another step in the second story. And each of these steps is accompanied by three, interrelated consequences: exile, difficulty in farming, and hiding from God.

As we draw our meditation on these stories to a close, we may wonder: “Whv?” Whv. in fact, does failure to wield passion prop- erlv. failure to harness properly the fiery will to create - why does this kind of failure lead to these particular consequences?

We began to ponder this question in Part One, but I think we are now in a position to understand it more deeply Before you turn the page and begin the final portions of this book, I’djike y0U to gtop and think about these three.things; exile, difficulty in instead exiled from hie land (Numbers 35:23-25). Cain's exile, according to the Midrash, was the prototype for that law.

farming, and hiding from God. Ask yourself: How, if at all ^ these things related to one another? What is the core of this three- sided triangle? Is there a common drum-beat to which they all step? I think that there is.

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^ Chapter Fourteen

There's No Place Like Home

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Bxile; difficulty in farming; hidingfrom God-isthereacommon B ithe-me? We can begin by doing a little consolidating As we observed earlier, the Torah treats exile and difficulty farming as y§al expressions of.aJargeridea - theadvent of a certain distance between man and the land:

...And now, cursed are^you from the land that opened its maw to take ypur brother’s blood from your hands. When you work the land, it will no longer give its strength to you; a wanderer shall you be in the land...” (Genesis 4:11-12)

We can think of these words as forming a kind of triangle The fact that Cain is cursed from the earth - distanced from the land - is the top of the triangle, the “topic-sentence,” as it were. The two points at the base of the triangle then clarify what this “distance from tKe land” means in real life: it means that you will experience difficulty in farming and exile. These two things ex­press a kind of alienation Cain will feel with respect to the land.

Difficulty in Farming ' • ^jJe^ftoBuintlhe Land

We can now go back and simplify our inquiry. iMaprig' iden­tified the unifying theme in “difficulty in farming” and “exile,” wl are now looking for common denominators between two elements rather than three. We now want to know: what do “distance from? the earth” and “hiding from God” have in common?[[14]](#footnote-14)

Well, the ideas of “hiding” and distance die calami) siiutfl lar. When one hides from someone else, one is avoiding, contact with them, creating distance. Now let’s ask: what if anything, do\* “earth” and “God” have in common?

At first glance, you might answer that “earth” and “©od” could not be more different. One is the Master of the' Unperse; the other, a part of that universe. One is the most powerful Being in existence; the other, merely an inanimate objegt, -

But there is a similarity. We get a clue to that connection in the anguish Cain feels at the prospect of alienation from both God and land: “‘My sin is greater than I can bear. Here, you have

cast me away from the face of the land, and from Your face I will hide...\*” (Genesis 4\*13).

We explained previously that the verb for “cast away” is the same as.the Hebrew, word for divorce igprashti). Something in­tensely personal is occurring here; the land, like God, is an im­portant being in Cains life, yet Cain is banished from beholding tlie “faee”of either:

..you have cast me awayfrom the face of the land, mdfrom

Yourftiejeiii willfchide. J. “ •

Why is all this so personal?

Let Us Make Man

Some earlier verses will help our understanding. Back in the be- ginning of Genesis, when humanity is first created, the Almighty n|es>a\,eurious turn of phrase. “Let us make man,” He declares (Genesis 1:26). Over the ages, biblical commentators have strug­gled to understand the use of the plural here. Who was God talk­ing tb. when iFd&ffld‘“us”?

The great commentator Rashi (eleventh-century France) suggests that perhaps God was speaking to the angels, but Nach- manides (thirteenth century, Spain) has a particularly fascinating interpretation. He writes the following:

It was only on the first day of creation that God created some­thing from nothing. From then on, He fashioned everything from the elements He had brought into being on the first day. For example, He empowered water to give rise to living things, as it is stated “let the water swarm.and He allowed animal life to emerge from the land, as the verse states: “Let the land bring forth living things" (Genesis m3). When He created man, though, the Lord said: “Let us make man,. \* In so doing, the Almighty was speaking to the earth - the last “being” to bring forth life [see the immediately preceding

verse about earth “bringing forth” the animals]. In effect, He was saying: “You and I together will make man. You will contribute the elements for the body, as you did for the ani­mals, and I will contribute the soul” as it is written: “and He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life...” (Nachmanides to Genesis Ш6)

The implications of Nachmanides’ words ate astounding, and not just for the way he anticipates the direction of modern biology\* seven centuries before Pasteur, Darwin and Mendel were even a gleam in history’s eye. Nachmanides is suggesting here a key to the mysterious connection between humanity and landv Jfeople will fight and die for land and will form intense emotional bonds to the ground they call home. Why? Because, at the end of the day, land is not merely a “thing.” Along with GalMpB- source I from which we all come. And because of that, it wilLalwayspifafej ter personally to us.

A creature always wants a relationship with -its .Greatoni^je,. long to live in harmony with our parents, for as Dorothy famously said, “There’s no place like home.” On some level, it is,to bothdandt and God that humanity longs to return - a dream that, ironically, is perhaps fully realized only in death:

Dust you are, and to the dust you shall return. (Gfenesis. 308)

The dust [that comprises the body] shall go back to the land, as it once was; and the spirit will return to the Lord who had im­parted it... (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

Cain, God, and Mother Earth

It is no coincidence that we call land “Mother Earth,” for she pro­vides humanity with the essential gifts of femininity: nourishment and a safe place to be, a place to call home.

A mother provides a safe environment for her family. This is

true not only physically but also emotionally At its best, a home is a place where children need not fear the caprice and unpredict­ability of the outside world. Likewise, a mother provides nour­ishment to her family, not only physically but also emotionally She provides not just food but love, nurturing her offspring and helping them grow into stable, happy human beings.

A woman gives these twin gifts, nourishment and a place to be, not only to her fully developed family but to her developing family as well. She offers them from the very beginning, through the organ that is the embodiment of femininity, the womb. What does a womb provide the fetus ensconced within it? It provides total nourishment as well as a perfectly calibrated “safe place to be,” an environment completely insulated from the shocks of the outside world

Mother Earth provides these gifts to her children, too. She provides us with a place to be, a home where we can live, and she also provides us with nourishment through the agricultural bounty of her fertile soil.

In the wake of Abel's murder, Cain finds himself distanced from both these aspects of the land, and he also finds himself hid­ing from God. Having failed to give his all to his own Creator, he becomes aware that Mother Earth will no longer give her all to him: “When you work the earth, it will no longer give its strength to you...” (Genesis 4:11). Instinctively, Cain knows exactly what this means. It is a punishment greater than he can bear, because now he has been “cast away” from the “feces" of both Mother Earth and the Almighty, becoming painfully out of touch with those who created him.

At long last, we can go back and plot the continuum of these narratives, the sagas of the Tree of Knowledge and then Cain and Abel, and we can see how they form, almost seamlessly a single story

From Forbidden Fruit to Murder When Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge, they iden­tified themselves with their creative will, energized it, and began

to see life through the lens of this will. In so doing, they became “godly,” after a fashion. God, the ultimate Creator, sees things through the lens of His own Creativity. Things that are in line with God’s desire are “good”; things that aren’t are “evil.”

*“And you shall be as gods, knowing good and evil[[15]](#footnote-15).”*

But the humans who ate from the tree were onlyhalf-godly. They were passionate, driven, like God, to create and foster new life. But unlike God, their ability to properly steer this newly fired sense of creativity remained limited and out of proportion with its power.

Gods creativity is inherently disciplined. TheiCreator of 'Jtf understands that the world needs not just life, hut death,at the appropriate time as well When a baby develops in the womb, -vh hands begin as a kind of formless paddle. Fingers аге/овте^рШ^ because skin cells between each of the digits die а&ЈмШВЈк sculpting what we call a hand in the inky blackness of the womb. Death is painful and sad, but necessary. A - dasdjpMneji works with death as well as life, sculpting with exquisite care ev­erything from galaxies to ecosystems to babies.\*

As a consequence of eating from the tree, humanity is pow­erfully creative, but the question is: can we also be disciplined? TEe uncertain answer to this question has many consequences.

Adam and Eve immediately become fearful of their nakedness, suddenly aware that the raw power of sexuality could cmstuhem Moreover, humanity - possessor of unbridled creativity-is itself distanced from its own creators, namely, God and land Finally, humanity flounders amidst its own ability to create: in the wake ,ol the Tree of Knowledge, pain in childbirth enters the world for the fir|htmie..

Tfte very next story in the Bible, the saga of Cain and Abel, picks up where the previous episode left off In the aftermath of the Tree of Knowledge, the great question faring humankind ia how, in fact, will we steer the fearsome forces of mir own creativ­ity? Cain must ask himself similar questions. Will he be ruled by his passion to create! Will he end up sacrificing his relationship with God on that altarl Or will he rule over his passion and en­hance hisfjblationship with God instead?

In\*failing to meet this challenge; in failing to see that desire is .something hepossesses, not something he is; in failing to guide the inherently blind creative|MMnside him, Cain suffers an intensi­fication of thpic^isequences felt by his parents. He, like Adam, is alienated from hjs creators, but more permanently so. He intuits that he will not merely hide from God momentarily but will spend ■ life in that state of hiding [...and from your face I will hide], likewise, he suffers a гцоге profound alienation from Mother Earth I a complete inability to find a home on her soil and utter frustration iq reaping the nourishment she can provide.

From Cain's World to Our World

Cain fails. But his story is not over.

*“Its desire is unto you, but you can rule over it..?*

Although Cain did not listen to what God had to tell him, the words of that speech were not wasted. Csarfs predicament is timeless, and the struggle to deal with creativity and somehow

channel its force constructively - this challenge is with us asjnuch today as it was then. The words of God’s speech to Cain, preserved tunelessly in the Torah, speak to us as well as to the original re­cipient of that message. Perhaps, centuries and millennia later, we can find it within ourselves to listen to them.

^ Chapter Fifteen

The Death of Cain

B

ow did Cain die? We don’t know for sure. The Bible doesn’t . toll us. BM the Sages of the Midrash had something to say about the matter. Working with various dues from the bibli­cal text, they patched together an account of how the man who committed the first murder met his own demise.

The story they tell is bizarre and haunting. At face value, it borders on the absurd. But, as I explained earlier, midrasbic sto­ries are not necessarily meant to be interpreted at face value, They often use the language of allegory to point to deeper, underlying currents in a story. For all its improbability, then, the story the Midrash tells about Cain’s death maybe quite truthful indeed.

Before I reveal the conclusion the Midrash readies, lets take a look at the biblical clues upon which it is based. As near as I can figure, these are some of the issues that nudged the Sages toward their view of how Cain died.

An Unexplained Fear

The Torah records that after Cain killed Abel, die Lord imposed a number of punishments upon Cain. In response, Cain turned

to God and expressed concern that his own demise would not be long in coming:

And Cain said to God: “My sin is greater than I dan bear. . . anyone who finds me wifi kill me.” God replied to him: “Therefore, anyone who kills Cain will be avenged sevenfold”; and God placed a mark upon Cain, so that all who found him would not kill him. (Genesis 4:13-15)

We might ask: why exactly does Cain feel so vulnerable?^,# is true that God has imposed a number of punishments ort him, from difficulty in farming to exile, but Me has not decreed that Cain deserves to be killed. The Lord has^nOt posted <anf ;“Cain: Wanted, Dead or Alive” signs around the local neighborhood. Why, then, is Cain so worried? Moreover, precisely who are these other people Cain fears will do him in? The world’s aggregate population was pretty tiny at the time. Besides his parents and Mrs. Cain, there weren’t too many others around. Whom, really, is Cain afraid of?

Rashi, grandfather of the medieval commentators. is^^^Ej eredby this question. His answer, which originates jn-the-Midxash. is that the killers Cain feared were.notmenhuLAnimalsJIhatis, in the wake of his act of murder, Cain was worried that a beast might devour him.

Has Rashi solved the problem? Well, perhaps he has ex­plained who might kill Cain, but he hasn’t explained why. Why would Cain all of a sudden worry that animals would kill him? God didn’t command animals to avenge Abel’s blood. What’s more, if Cain had the means to defend himself adequately against the animal world before he killed Abel, he presumably had these same capabilities afterward, too. Why, all of a sudden, does he become afraid?

The Mystery of "Sevenfold Vengeance"

So Cain’s fear of death is one oddity, but it is not the only one. An­other strange thing is God’s response to this fear, his promise to Cain that whoever kills him will suffer sevenfold vengeance. Why, for starters, would God want to promise such a thing to Cain? It is one thing to soothe Cain by telling him that he will be protected from would-be-killers; but^why extend to Cain, a murderer, the assurance that anyone killing him will be punished seven times more severely than the crime warrants? God didn’t extend this courtesy to Abel, the innocent victim of murder. Why extend it to Cain, Abel’s killer?

And there’s another problem, too. What, exactly, does “sev­enfold vengeance” mean? Presumably, the worst thing God could do to a killer of Cain, by way of vengeance, would be to kill that person himself. But that’s not sevenfold vengeance - that’s just plain vanilla vengeance, a simple tit-for-tat Where does the “seven” part fit in?

A New Theory

A strange verse, tucked away at the end of the story of Cain and Abel, may hold the key to answering these questions. Just after the Torah reveals Cain’s punishments, it goes on to give a long list of genealogical tables. We hear all about Cain’s descendants; who gave birth, to whom and how long they lived Many may wonder why the ВТе felt it necessary to include all this apparently trivial information. But if you stop and actuahyjead. these genealogi­cal tables, you will find something.CUJlQU& The Torah goes into tremendous detail about one particular family, a family appear­ing at the very end of the chain of descendants. We are told the names and professions of each child; then, strangely enough, the text quotes verbatim a short and cryptic declaration made by the father of these children,

In **that speech, the father te**lls of having killed a man. He also re**fers to the “sevenfold vengeance” of Ca**in, as well as the ven­**geance he expecfs'wffl beexacte**d**againsfh**imTa latter-day killer.

And whafs more, if we bother to count ail the Svho^b^MvhonA’’ in Jjetween, we will find that this mysterious mention of murder

occurs precisely - wouldn’t you know it - in the seventh genera­tion removed from Caip.

An interesting possibility begins to unfold. Maybe these verses describe the execution of Cain’s mysterious sevenfold ven­geance. Maybe the phrase “sevenfold” didn’t refer to the severity of the vengeance (that someone Killing Cain would be killed seven times over) but to the time at which the vengeance occurs■. Maybe thffimticipated vengeance would take place after, a^evenfoldiapse in generations, and maybe this is precisely what we are reading about at the very end of Cain’s genealogical table.

Such a possibility bears further exploration. So let’s take a closer look at these strange events that occur seven generations removed from Cain. What, in feet, happened in that anticipated “seventh generation”?

The **Lemech** Connection

Only a few details are unambiguous. We are introduced to amah named Lemech, and we are told that he has two wives and шјјк, children, three boys and a girL We know their names. The three boys are Yaval, Yuval and Tuval-Kayin, and the girl is named Na’ama. Yaval becomes the “father of all shepherds and tentidwell- ers.” Yuval becomes the “father of harps and cymhals.” i.e.. the inventor of the first musical instruments. And Tu val-Kavin is the inventor of ironworks, the first to fashion metal weaponry.

The Torah then tells us that one day, Lemech convened hi.s two wives and made a disturbing speech to them;

Listen to my voice, wives of Lemech, hearken to my woyds:

For ! have kiUed a man to my injury, and a child to my wound.

YeSj sevenfold was the vengeance of Cain: and Lemech, sev­enty-seven.” (Genesis 4:23-24)

Lemechs declaration is difficult to decipher, to say the least. He talks about having killed a man and a child, and refers, strangely,

to the promise of his ancestor’s sevenfold vengeance. What does

lipineatttosay?

The Sages' Parable

the Sages of the Midrash gathered the various puzzle pieces of Lemech’s story and constructed a parable to interpret it In the ensuing Midrash, we learn\* how Cain died. Here is what the Mi­drash Says:

Lemech was a seventh-generation descendant of Cain. He was blind, and he would go out himtingwith his son, [Tuval- Kayin]. [His son] would lead hffin by the hand, and when he Would see an animal, he would info'rm his father, [who would ^proceed to hunt it] . One day [TuvahKayin] cried out to his .father: “I see something like an animal over there.” Lemech iSp^e&gback on his bow and shot... .The child peered from afar at the dead‘body... and'Said to Lemech: “What we killed bears Мше figure ofiffcmamluteithasa hom protruding from its fore- j'- head.” Lemech,then exclaimed in anguish: “Woe unto me! It Hfa my ancestor, gain1!” And he clapped his hands together in •>? ^grieMn, doing?so, though, he unintentionally struck Tuval- - Kayin and kiled-him? too; (Тапсћигна^дп Genesis, ii)

vt&đ storyf We hear of a hunt gone awry, with a bind Lemech shooting arrows at thebeck and call of his over-ea­ger sonilittle Thval-Kayin. Ws-hear of aael^s^y^aiiLbeing mis- talcpn for an animal. walkingamund^vith-ajtaang&Iiam.nrotmd- ing from his head, miat exactly was Cain doing parading around the forest in a unicorn costume?

This much is clear: according to the.Sages.the "man” Lemech Idled “to fhis] injury" was none other than Cain, and the “child” he struck “to his wound” was his own soq, Tiival-Kayin- If we put two and two together, the Midrash seems to take the position that when God talked about “sevenfold vengeance” for Cain, He wasn’t

talking about punishing Cain’s murderer. .Instead, GocLwas talk­ing about punishing Cain himself. He was promising .that-Cain himself would be killed m yengeance for Abels murder - but that this would ocqur only after a sevenfold lapse in generations.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The Advent of the Unicom

So where did Cain get that unicorn costume? Why did he have т horn, of all things, sticking out of his forehead? It is time to re­visit, one last time, the story of Adam and Eve in Eden - the story where the cascade leading to Cain and Abel first begins.

To this point, our study has repeatedly emphasized the nections between the Cain and Abel narrative and ffi'e-§to'ry of Adam and Eve in the Garden. A triad of consequences = (eSafe, difficulty in forming, hiding from God - besets humankind after they eat from the Tree, and these same consequences,ajiappeasr, only more intensely, after Cain kills Abel The Torah, as wehjwe seen, presents the Cain and Abel episode as a continuation of-the story of the Tree of Knowledge. Cain’s act of murder was funda- mentally similar to Adam and Eves eating.from theJme.ЈСш.б just another chapter in the same saga.

If we had to boil down that saga to just a single, simple sen­tence, what would we say that these two, linked stories, are about? Wf might say they are about what it really means to be a human being and not an apimal.

In Eden, humanity was accosted by the primal serpent - an

animal that walked, talked, and apparently was an intelligent be­ing. In fact, the snake was very nearly human, so that the chal­lenge the snake proffers to humanity touches on how we define ourselves in relation to him - that is, “what makes us human and him a snake?” The snake began his words with: “Even if God said don’t eat from the tree, [so what?].” God may have told jou not to eat of the tree, but those words are belied by your desires. Ш you want to eat? If so, God is talking to you through that desite. He put JhoseJnstincts inside you».and yonobey GodbyJhltow- ing them.

In making this argument, the snake was faithfully represent- ingthe perspective of the animal world. The dividing line between I human and animal, we have argued, lies the nature of one’s es-1 1 sential self, and how one perceives God “speaking” to ones self 1 I An animal experiences its “self” as the sum total of its desires. A human experiences his or her self as a consciousness that rises } above and beyond desire, which can critically evaluate desire and I decide whether to act upon it In each case, God addresses the I “essential self” of the being to whom He is talking. God speaks to [ 1 an animal through its desire; Gpd\_speaks to humankind by ad- j \ dressing onrjninds.

The snake held out the possibility that perhaps humans should adopt the same approach as the animal world: “Don’t lis­ten to God’s commands, listen to the voice of passion and instinct, God’s voice that speaks to you from the inside. Therein resides the real ‘you’.” For an animal, the voice of desire always reigns supreme.

In the act of reaching for the Forbidden Fruit, Adam and Eve succumbed to the snake’s argument. In accepting the argument I that, for humans, too, internal desire could be the final arbiter of j I God’s Will humanity identified its core with desire. We lost a little j bit of ourselves and became a little more snake-like.

As a result of that failure, God punished all the relevant par­ties. The snake’s “punishment," though, is particularly interesting. He was told that henceforth he would eat dust, crawl on his belly,

and that hatred and strife would reign in the relationship between his progeny and the children of Eve. The common denominator in these three punishments is evident the snake would become more obviously different - a being that crawls rather than walks, a being subsisting on food that humans would never touch, and a being whose presence registers instinctive alarm and enmity in the collective psyche of humanity. Ihe snake would become more obviously animal-like, more clearly removed from the realm of humans. Having failed once to distinguish ourselves from the animal world, humankind no longer will be faced with as subtle and dangerous a temptation.

Still, humanity’s struggle to define itself in relation to thešani- mal world continued. The story of Cain and Abel was a subsequent battle in the same war - a war centered on how people are meant to relate to their passions, the creative will surging inside them. Cain became enamored of his own ability to create in partnership with God. He was entranced by the products of that enterprise. In the end, that became his core. He sacrificed everything - his rela- tionship with God and the life of his own brother - on that altar. In killing his brother, he had in effect used Abel’s blood as fertil- izer for the ground The life of a brother had become a regrettable but acceptable casualty of Cains continuing, intoxicating quest to bring forth life from the ground As it did in Eden, blind desire once again held sway.

In t**he wake of** that basic failure, Cain **began** to fear that beasts would kill him. Why? Because Cain has lost a further battle in the war over what makes us human and not animals. He has become **a little m**ore animal-like in submitting to the blind **will** of desire. Normally, the animal world possesses an instinctive fear of the human world, a realm set apart from it But Cain intuits that he can no longer count on that fear. The line separating **him from** beast has become blurred In the wake of his act of violence, the beasts might now perceive that Cain really was not all that differ­ent from them. The days of comfortable distance from the world of the jungle were now behind him.

Cain pleaded to the Almighty for protection from these new­found threats. And the Lord acceded to that request, giving Cain a mark for protection from anyone seeking fo molest him. We won­dered earlier why it is “fair” that Cain, a murderer, would merit spe- eialprotection from death at the hands of others. But that mark, the Midrash is saying, was not a supernatural sign promising heavenly retribution to anyone who harmed Cain, nor was it some artificial device to convince the animals that Cain really was a human to be feared after all. Instead, the sign, as the Midrash tells it, »ras a simple animals horn. Having become vulnerable to his new compatriots in the world of the jungle, it is only fair that Cain he given a hnra. the same means of defense available to any other beast

Yelin a savage twist of irony, in the end it is precisely the horn given to Cain tor-protection thatdoes him in. Little Tuval-Kayin sees Cain’s horn and immediately assumes that he has sighted a beast,.¥j|on,closer examination, though, theboy isn’t so sure. Ihe is man-like, and heggfi’t figure out whether their kill had been man or beast. He can’t tell, not because he ran f see well - that’s his father s problem, not his - but because theidenhty of his prey really is uncertain: Cain has crossed into the no-man’s land between ћптплп and animal. Cain, the person who fearedhe would be killed hv an animal, is killed because a person couldn’t

The Child and the Blind Hunter The midrashic stoyy isdnteresting not only for the way it portrays CaWrbut'for its yigw of Cain’s killer as well. The image of Tuval- Kayin and Lemech, the child and the blind hunter, is a memorable лпр, To fully understand its significance, I propose we take a quick look at the larger, extended family.

Tuval-Kayin, the child weapon-maker, has two brothers - men by the names ofYuval and Yaval. If you replay the names of giese three siblings over in vour mind, they should sound vaguely familiar, Yyval, Yaval. and Tuval-Kayin. 'What do they remind you of?

Well, to tell the truth, if you are used to reading the Bible in English, they may not remind you of much. But if you switch to Hebrew, the resonance in these names is unmistakable. The He­brew original for the name “Cain” is Kayin, which reappears in the appellation given his descendant, Tuval-Kayin. Likewise, the Hebrew name for “Abel” is Hevel or Haval, which sounds sus­piciously similar to the descendant we meet seven generations later, “YavaL”

Kayin and Hevel are brothers; Tuval-Kayin and Yaval are brothers. But the resemblance goes beyond names, too. Just as we are told the professions of Cain and Abel, we are told the profes­sions of Tuval-Kayin and YavaL And, wouldn’t you know it, the professions adopted by these seventh-generation descendants are strikingly similar to the arts practiced by their forebears. Cain/ Kayin was the words first killer, and Tuval-Kayin, his namesake- descendant, makes weaponry. Abel/Haval is the first shepherd in history, and his namesake-descendant in the seventh generation is Yaval, the father of traveling herdsmen.

These connections did not go unnoticed by the Sages of the Midrash. Rashi observes, for example, that Tuval-Kayins name signifies that “he perfected (metavd)\* the arts of Kayin” (Rashi to Genesis 4:22). Cain killed without benefit of tools; Tuval-Kayin came along and, by forging weaponry, gave the art of killing a technological boost. Yaval, the seventh-generation heir to Haval/ Abel, arguably did likewise. He perfected the art of Abel. Abel, the ancestor, grazed his flocks, but Yaval pushed the envelope further. As Rashi put it, he - the “father of herdsmen” - constantly moved his tents, transporting flocks from pasture to pasture, to ensure a virtually never-ending supply of grassland (see Rashi to 4:20).t

i In Hebrew, “metavel" (“one who perfects”) it the verb form of the name “TfiyalT

f The middle brother, Yuval, seemingly hat no analogue in the Cain and Abel saga, in which there were only two brothers. We might speculate, though, that his name - Yuval - seems to be a cross between Tuval-Kayin and Yaval. Indeed, his craft, the making of musical Instruments, might be seen as a cross between

These great leaps forward all take place in the seventh genera­tion after Cain and Abel. Seven, in the Torah, is a number laden with symbolic import. It often signifies completion - bringing a process to its culmination. God completed Creation in seven days, bringing the Universe to its finished state of being. After forty-nine years -jeven times seven - the Jubileje year (Yovel) is celebrated, when “freedom is proclaimed throughout the land” and everything attains a new homeostasis, a new balance. Debts are forgiven and slaves are released from servitude. At the end of seven generations, the lines of Cain and Abel reach their frui­tion, too.

In the case of Cain, that destiny bears ominous overtones. His seventh-generation descendant, Tuval-Kayin, the metal­worker, takes the art of killing to new and more powerful lev- els, making weapons that would have been unimaginable to Cain himself, the ancestor of it all. But such isjhe way of things. We don’t always have control over the forces we set in motion.

Cain is powerless to stem the lethal forces he has begun to unleash, forces that culminate in the personage of Tuval-Kayin. But ironically, Tuval-Kayin and Lemech - the new killers - are, in their own ways, just as powerless in the face of these forces.

When you get right down to it, the partnership of Tuval- Kayin and Lemech has to be the craziest hunting duo one could possibly imagine. Tuval-Kayin spots a leopard at a hundred paces and calls out the coordinates to his father. Lemech, who can’t see a blasted thing, wheels around sixty degrees to his left, takes a moment to calculate range and trajectory, then lets his arrows fly. The image of a child weapon-maker leading his blind father on hunting expeditions is comedic, but chilling. Neither the father nor the child is in control. Neither is quite aware of the awesome power they so irresponsibly wield. Both are powerful engines - but nothing of consequence guides either of them.

the pastoral profession of shepherding and the technological innovations of metallurgy and practical tool-making.

Three Blind Men

A quick survey of blind men in the Bible turns up an interesting pattern. Lemech, according to the Sages, was blind. Isaac, toward the end of his life, suffered from failing eyesight And so did Eli. the high priest mentioned at the beginning of I Samuel. Send­ing a commonality here, the Sages of the Midrash commented: “Anyone who raises a wicked son or trains a wicked disciple is destined eventually tp. lose his eyesight” (Midrash Rabbah on Genesis, 65:9).

TheSages were not doctors, and the observation they made was not necessarily medical in nature, but spiritual. Why would a father who raises wicked children eventually become blind? Perhaps the Sages were not talking about the physical igg^yyjto1 see, but an emotional blindness - a deep-seated unwillingness to see. Isaac can’t bring himself to face the true naturejff Esau, and Eli can't bear to face the sins Ms sons commit. These otherwise prescient fathers are blind to what is obvious to all others around them. When reality is too cruel to see, the best among us can eas­ily make themselves blind to its horror.

In the view of the Midrash, Lemech, like Isaac and Eli, is blind. It is not so much that his son is evil - after all1, Tuval-Kayin is only a child - but the dangers of his craft are entirely lost on the oblivious father. There is a kid out there making sawed-off shot­guns, and instead of restraining him, Lemech invites little Tuval out for hunting parties. Lemech can easily rationalize the deadly arts of his son - after all, it is notguns that kill people, hut people that kill people - and if all my boy does is make the swords that others use... well, that’s a good, dean living, isn’t it? The mandate of parents is to guide their children, but in this case it is little Tu­val-Kayin who is the leader, guiding - with devastating inaccu­racy - the arrows of his blind father.

The seventh generation is the apogee, and in it the ge nera - tions of Cain are slowly spinning out of control, Tuval-Kayin really is, “Cain Perfected.” Cain failed to rule over the raging passions that beset his soul, and Lemech has failed to rule over the raging

power of his young son’s killing machines. Seven generations from Cain, nothing has changed; it is just the stakes that havejjotten higher. The legacy of the Forbidden Fruit is alive and welL Hu­manity is~B&coming everjmore snake-like, as raw power, left to its own devices, consistently overwhelms its bearer.

The Second Lemech and the Wife of Noah Thej:hildren of Lemech are the last descendants of Cain that the world will ever know. The great Flood - the ultimate destruction of humanity - is right around the corner. A glimmer pf hope, though, beckons to humanity.

Right after the Torah finishes telling us of Cain’s seven gen- erations of descendants - indeed, immediately after Lemech’s di­sastrous pronouncement of “seventy-seven-fold vengeance” - the Torah relates something fascinating. We hear of a second chain of generations, beginning with the hirth of a child named Shet (Gen­esis 4:25). Shet was a third son bom to Eve, a son born after Cain killed Abel, and the text tells us that Shet, in Eve’s mind, consti­tuted a replacement of sorts for her murdered son, Abel (Genesis 4:2,5). Interestingly, the list of Shet’s descendants is introduced with the words: “These are the generations of Adam” - as if to say that these are the real generations of Adam. And they are. After all, Abel was murdered and had no children. Caines children are wiped out after seven generations in the great flood. It is really only this last child, Shet, who allows the generations of Adam to continue in perpetuity. JFQr fiPglLr the saving remnant of humanity - is a descendant of Shet.

Strangely, as you begin to go through them, the descendants of Shet sound alot Uke the descendants of Cain. For example, Cain has a descendant named Metushael, and Shet has a descendant named Metushelech. Cain has a child by the name of Chanoch, and Shet has a descendant by the same name. Curiously, Shet's immediate offspring is a child named “Enosh,” a word which (like Adam) has come to mean “man”, and the child of Enosh is Keinan, which seems a variation on Kayin/Cain. It is as if Shet’s

own line of heirs contains a mirror both of Adam himself and of Adam’s son, Cain.

Well, it can’t come as too much of a surprise that a seventh- I generation descendant of Eposh - this second Adam - is a <ftild named... you guessed it Lemech.. ..\* In case vou missed the {point, this second Lemech just happens to live to the ripe old age i of - seven.hundred and seventy-seven vears/So. when all is sald'l l and dernek aTseven gen&^oHs/eaffiTihe‘^ТБе line of Adami\_and] I Adam n (Enosh) - come to their apex: both produce a Lemech.j I But whereas the first Lemech gives birth to Tuval-Kavin. a son who ! I becomes a partner in the destruction nf life, the second Lemech | ! gives birth to a son who will allow for the perpetuation oflife., The j child of Lemech н is a man by the name of Jfloah.j

While the three sons of Lemech i die in a flood, the child of Lemech n builds an ark. And yet, while the children of Lemech i perish in that flood, the legacy of Lemech i is not erased entirely. One of his children, according to the Sages, survives. According to tihe Midrash, his daughter Na’amah (the sister of Tuval-Kayin) becomes the wife of Noah (Midrash Rabbah од Genesis 2з;з,).

So a daughter of Lemech i survives by marrying the son of Lemech n. In that union, ћшшгШу eomes full circle. The doomed line of Cain merges with a spark of life from Shet, the man who, according to Eve, was a replacement for Abel. At long last, the legacies of Cain and “replacement Abel” have come together.\_as a tather from one line and a rnbfoerTmmTbe unite in the arClo perpetuate humanity anew.

When we look back on Cain and his legacy, it is easy to dis­regard him, to feel that humanity is better off without having to deal with the wickedness he manifests. But evidently Abel - or his replacement - is not enough of a foundation upon which to build a new world. For all the danger he brings to the table, Cain

I **This L**em**ech, like the fir**st on**e, is bor**n seven generations after Enogh aod Adam, respectively.Moreoyj^j^ssecondl^mech Jive« for **a total 0/777 y**ears.

The connections between Lemech and the theme.fi/seven are auiteintengeT'

is a necessary partner. Somehow, humanity needs the energies of both Cain and Abel - ground, coupled with nothingness; pos­session, bound together with breath - to move on, to build itself in perpetuity. And so it is that - in the personhood of Noah and Na’amah - under the live-saving roof of an ark, a fragmented hu­manity finally gains a semblance of unity, iustas the storm-clouds of apocalypse gather on the horizon.

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R

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**"Something new ;шр under the sun"**

Those of us who are conditioned to the Biblical adage “there is nothing new under the sun ” are especially convinced of its truth with regard to contemporary Biblical commentary. Very occasionally, we are shaken from our cynicism by something truly new. Rabbi David Fohrman’s teachings have long been such a refreshing surprise for me, for they are indeed “new” interpretations of ancient sacred texts. Now that David has at last collected some of his teachings in book form, the broader public has a delicious surprise in store.

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Rabbi Berel Wein

Founder, The Destiny Foundation; Author, Triumph of Survival,

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Mix originality with brilliance, add scholarship and a dash of good writing; fill with love and concern...and you have another product *by* Rabbi David Fohrman. In Talmudic parlance, this book is a dish fit for a royal table - olah al shulchan melachim.

Rabbi David Cohen

Author, Bircas Yavetz and Maasei Avos Siman Ubanini

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Torah uses the word “tov” in this way elsewhere. When Cod saw the light and it was “good" what did that mean? When Cod said that it was not **“good”** for man to be alone, what did that mean? Was the light morally good? Was the human morally evil when created without a partner? Neither possibility seems probable. God seems to be saying that the light was desirable, and that it was not desirable for the human to remain a solitary being. To call something **“good”** is to approve of it, to say that the thing conforms to my desires. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The verse states that God made "the Tree of Life in the middle of the Garden, and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil” The phrase “in the middle of the Garden” modifies only the first tree, not the second one. If they were both really in the came place, the way to say it would have been: . .the Tree of Life and die Tree of Knowledge in the middle of the Garden.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Adam and Eve realize that they are naked and hide from God.

   God asks Adam where he is. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ft Is for this reason, perhaps, that God is known asthe ultimate “knower of Good and Evil.” Morality, from God’s perspective, really is a matter of will and desire, ft is God’s will that we try to align ourselves with. From our perspective, that will is external to us -- hence, we can use the terms "true” and “fake" to characterize it. But from God’s own perspective, that will is internal The terms "Good and Evil,” which denote categories of desire, are entirely accurate. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Almighty fashions clothes from animal skins for Adam and Eve to replace the more primitive coverings they had made out of leaves.

   * After sending Adam and Eve out of the Garden, “lest they eat from the Tree of Life" God stations angels, cherubs with flaming swords, at the entrance to Eden to guard the way back to the Tree of Life.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. It is true, of course, that the Bible itself speaks of God “regretting" having made humankind. But the Bible also speaks of the “outstretched arm" of God, and few of us are willing to concede that God has arms. The Bible sometimes uses anthropomorphism with reference to God, speaking of the Almighty - a Being whose essence we cannot begin to understand - in human terms that we can understand. When the Bible does so, though, we are getting just a [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. “Ayeh” In the Garden of Eden, God seeks the whereabouts of a temporarily missing person (Adam). In the story of Cain and Abel, the person He seeks (Abel) is gone for good.

   Hiding. In the immediate aftermath of his sin, Adam hides from God momentarily. Cain, on the other hand, intuits that he will spend his life hiding from God; that he will do so per­petually in the indefinite future.

   * Difficulty Farming. Adam will have to wrest bread out of the ground “by the sweat of his brow” He will have to work to till the land; he will have to fight weeds and thorns - but at the end of the day, he will have his bread. Cain, on the other hand, is told that even if he works the land with mighty toil,

   “it will not continue to give its strength to you,” Cain will ex­perience a fundamental loss of agricultural potential. The land simply won’t produce anymore what it once did.

   • Exile. Before eating from the tree, Adam and Eve called [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Yes, the syntax is awkward, but in Hebrew that’s exactly what tbejextsays: that Cain will be cursed from the ground. The strange phrase ran either mean that the ground is the source of Cain’s curse (the one doing the cursing, as it were), or that the effect of the curse is to separate Camjrom the land. Either way, the sense is that a rupture has occurred between Cain and the ground. The earth is being portrayed in strangely sentient and personal terms, and the implication is that something has gone wrong with Cains relationship with this being, the earth.

   t Interestingly, the end of the story tells us that Cain settles in the land of Nod and builds a city, which he names after his son. At first glance, Cain seems to have succeeded in subverting his decree of exile, but the place he has “setded” in is not really a place; its name is the Land of Nod, a Hebrew term that means “the Land of Wandering”. And, as the classic commentator Nachmanides notes, the Torah speaks of Cain’s urban construction project - his building of a city - in the present tense. The text doesn’t say, as you might expect, that Cain built a city and dedicated it to his son, but rather that “Cain was building a city and dedicated it to his son..."

   According to Nachmanides, the present tense indicates that Cain never finished the project. He was perpetually “building”, starting at one point, then stopping, then starting again, always dreaming the dream hut never able to see the project through to completion. Cain desperately seeks to ground himself - to make a home for himself, or to build a whole dty full of homes. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Indeed, the very ward “matter’ may well dcrivejfrom the Latin and Greek word tor mother, “mater." [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Harriet Lerricr, *The* Dance *of* Anger: A *Woman’s* Guide *to* Changing the Pat­*terns of Intimate* Relationships *(Harper, 1997),* 125-126. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. make this unusual request **because what I am about to dis­cuss is both theo**logically explosive and easily misunderstoo**d It** concerns the Bible’s vi**ew o**f masculinity and femininity and the relationship between them. There are many who view the Bible as a tome written by men seeking to safeguard their patriarchal po**wer**, while keeping the WQh?en in their lives subjugated and docile. I myself do not share this view. But if someone with that agenda wanted to find grist for the mill, he would need look no further than the two verses to which I am about to direct your attention.

    It is easy to overlook just how astonishing these two verses [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The Torah states that before Cain killed Abel, both brothers were in the field, and the beginning of a conversation ensued between them. But itwas^Heue' beginning of a conversation. Most translations will render the action leadinpiji to murder in something like the following terms: “Cain spoke to Abel, and it happened, when they were both in the field, [that] Cain came upon Abel and killed him.” The problem, though, is that the Heb**rew tenujprCams**.sp£aktny **to Abel is not** vayedaber but vayomer, which mesas that the text doe**s not reall**y translate as “Cain spoke to Abel" but “Cain said to Abel”. **This,** however, creates a non-sequitur: If I tell you that x spoke to y, J don’t need to tell you **what w**ax said between them, but if I tell you that x said to y, I do have tg.^11 youjffihat was said, or else the sentence is incomplete. The sense of the verse, therefore, is of an interrupted conversation, that Cain started saying something to Abel, and, by rights, we should hear what it is - but before actually getting to it, Cain interrupted what he was saying and killed Abel instead. The murder was an **impulsive, v**iolent end to something that perhaps could have been resolved t**hrough mere word**s.

    t According to one Midrash (Midrash Rabbah, Deuteronomy z:z**6**), this ex- plains why Cain's punishment was exile. Later passages in the Torah set forth that a murderer who deliberately kills is subject to capital punishment, but one who kills inadvertently or without full knowledge of what he is doing, la [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This perspective is confirmed by a later verse in which Cain summarizes his punishments using the following language: “My sin is greater than I can bear. Here you have cast me away from the face of the earth and from the face pf Cod I wULhideT In Califs view, his suffering is about two things: distance from land and distance from God. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In Jewish tradition, God is closely associated with the concept of “truth” (e.g., “the seal of the Almighty is truth,” Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 55a). In Hebrew, the word “truth” is spelled aleph, mem, tav. Its very structure suggests the idea of balance between life and death. How so? Aleph is the first letter of the alphabet; mem the middle letter of the alphabet; and tav is the last. The first and middle letters of the word spell “era” (mother); the middle and last letters spell “met” (death). The seal of God is truth - disciplined creativity. “Emet" suggests the exquisite balance between motherhood, with its intense drive to foster life, and death, which imposes discipline and makes something meaningful out of raw life. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. In elaborating this point, Kashi notes a grammatical oddity in the veise in question and suggests that the phrase “whoever kills Cain/se venfold he will be avenged” should actually be read as two entirely separate statements, one refer­ring to avenging Cain; the other, to avenging Abel. First, God States “whoever kills Cain. 7? and the rest of the thought is left unsaid, implying an unspo**ken** threat: "Whoever kills Cam-. • well, we yvpn't even talk about what happens tQ him**.11** **As for the rest of** the phrase, "sevenfold will be awn^/l" **Kashi afe** g**este that thi**s refers to the way Abel’s killer will **he aveng**ed**. Tfrat isf** the **verse is** telli**ng us that Cain** will eventually have topa? with **his life for kil**lin**g** Ab**el -** but t**hat he** has ajeven-generation graqe gpriod bgjfore **vengeance opcurs.** [↑](#footnote-ref-16)