

## THE GARDEN OF EDEN



Genesis 3:1 "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves."

I, for one, simply love the story of the Garden of Eden! It is an enchanting tale that strikes me as being so very human! For instance, after eating the forbidden fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, Adam and Eve's eyes were opened, and they knew that they were naked, and they were ashamed, and so they sewed fig leaves to make loincloths. Somehow eating the

fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil distinguishes mankind from all the other animals in world, who were also naked, but who are not ashamed! What is more human than that, being embarrassed by our nakedness!

Then in the verses that follow today's reading, which we have all heard many, many, times, Adam and Eve heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the night, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" Did an omniscient God really not know where they were, or is just another prompt for them to be self-reflective about their behavior, as with the nakedness. Adam then replied to God's query, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself." So now man was afraid, as well as ashamed of his appearance. God said to Adam, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman protested and said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate." Oh, how I love that scene most of all, for what is more human than passing the blame onto another, and then claiming victimhood? It's not really my fault, Lord! The woman you gave me, God, she

made me do it, and you are partly to blame yourself for giving her to me! No, says the woman, the serpent that you God created made *me* do it, and you made him the craftiest of the animals! Adam and Eve have become human in this story, feeling shame and fear, and passing the blame and guilt of their own actions onto others, all because they ate of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil!

Why on earth did God put that tree there to begin with? And why was eating from it a sin? For is not knowing the difference between good and evil a good thing? Or was the sin not eating from it, but simply disobeying God's command not to eat from it? And why was this action alone worthy of them be thrust out of the Garden of Eden forever, cursed to work by the sweat of their brow and to suffer in the birth and raising of children, all because they weren't perfect in their behavior in the Garden?

Rabbi Harold Kushner, a very popular writer on religious themes, when I lived in Boston and knew him there, wrote one book entitled "*How Good Do We Have To Be?*" In his book, Rabbi Kushner suggests that the story of the Garden of Eden is not an account of people being punished for making one mistake, and thus losing Paradise forever all because they were not perfect. Rather it is, he says, the story of the first human beings graduating, evolving from the relatively uncomplicated world of animal life to the immensely complicated world of being human,

and knowing now there is more to life than eating and mating, that there are such things as Good and Evil out there. Adam and Eve suddenly enter a world where they will inevitably make many mistakes, not because they are necessarily weak or bad or disobedient, but because the choices in life are difficult --- however, the satisfactions of being human are equally great and rewarding. While animals can only be useful and obedient, human beings can be good or bad. The story of the Garden of Eden is not the story of the Fall of Man, he says, but of the Emergence of Humankind!

Rabbi Kushner doesn't believe that eating from the Tree of Knowledge was sinful. He believes it was one of the bravest and most liberating events in the history of the human race. Yes, its consequences were painful, yes, in the same way that growing up and leaving our parental home can be painful, in the same way that undertaking the responsibilities of marriage and parenthood can be painful. But for the person who has experienced the complex, hard-earned satisfactions of human existence, there is no doubt, he wrote, that it is all well worth the pain.

Likewise, Rabbi Kushner doesn't see Eve as the villain of the story here, duped by the serpent, enslaved by her appetites, and thus bringing sin and death into the world. No, she can also be seen as the heroine of the story, leading her husband into

the brave new world of real moral demands and real moral choices, something that we all must face for ourselves.

Moreover, religion in Kushner's eyes is not the carping voice of condemnation, as it is so often seen these days, telling us that the normal is sinful and that a well-intentioned mistake is an unforgiveable transgression that will damn us forever. Religion is, instead, he argues, the voice of self-reflection that will guide us through the minefield of difficult moral demands that we all have to make, but sharing with us the insights and the experiences of the greatest souls of the past, offering us comfort and forgiveness and mercy when we are so troubled by the painful choices that we all have to make in life. As the theologian Paul Tillich wrote, "One cannot be human, therefore, without being filled with chronic anxiety." What Freud called "the trauma of self-consciousness."

To say that we human beings can do wrong things, that we are capable of cruelty even, and deceit far worse than any other creature on the face of the earth, that none of us can ever live a perfect life, is simply a statement about the human experience and the complexity of the choices that we humans have to make. To say that we are destined to lose God's love or to go to Hell because of our sins is not a statement about us, but about God, about the tentative nature of God's love and the conditional nature of God's forgiveness. It is a claim that God expects

perfection from us and will settle for nothing less in this story. Rabbi Kushner agrees with the first concept, with the inevitable fallibility of human nature, but he strenuously rejects the second. If we humans, he says, are capable of forgiving one another, of recognizing our intermittent weaknesses even in good people, and in good intentions that sometime go astray, how can God not be capable of at least as much?

And alas, what would have happened if Eve had declined the serpent's temptation, Kushner asked, even though she saw that the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was good to eat and a delight to the eye? What would have happened if Eve had obeyed God's command not to eat of it? --- Man would not have to work for a living by the sweat of his brow. Woman would bear children without pain and raise them without trouble. Life would be easy. Both Adam and Eve would have lived forever in the Garden, as their children's children's children's children grew up, eventually causing the Garden to become overcrowded. Rabbi Kushner imagines God telling Adam and Eve that for the rest of their lives, they will have full bellies and pleasant smiles. All their needs will be met, so they will never then cry, and they will never then laugh. They will never long for something that they do not have, and never know the joy of receiving something that they have always wanted. They would not be wise

or good. They would be childlike, childish even, and they would not ever really know the true pleasures and pains of being human! Thank God that we do. Amen.