

Parashat Bereshit 5781

Shabbat Shalom. Here we are, back at *Bereshit*, the first *Parashah* of the book that bears the same name, known in English as Genesis. This *Parashah* has some of the best known parts of the Torah. I'd like to offer some comments on the story of the Garden of Eden and Adam and Eve. First, it's worth noting that this story which is so packed with memorable components, is rendered in so few verses. That's part of the wonder of the Bible – how much it can pack into so few words.

The Hebrew for the “Garden of Eden” is “*Gan Eden*” which literally means the “garden of pleasure.” It later became the term used to refer to the afterlife in “Heaven.”

People read the Bible and the Torah in many different ways. Some people read it very literally as though it were a history book. And though there are clearly historical elements in the Bible, reading it that way really misses the boat, in my opinion. Trying to find *Gan Eden* on a map is a terrible misreading. Seeing *Gan Eden* as an expression of the ideal of the human condition is much closer to the intent of the Torah. And that's certainly how many Jewish thinkers have read it. If we look at the Hebrew names for Adam and Eve, we likewise see the much larger intentions of the story. *Adam* in Hebrew is a word for Human Being sharing a root with the word for “earth” *adamah* and the word for “blood” *dam*. (The “a” in those Hebrew words is pronounced “ah”). In Genesis 1:27 it says that G!d created *Adam* in G!d's image, in the image of G!d, G!d created “him,” male and female G!d created them. Here you see how the word *Adam* is used to refer to male and female humans.

Translation is a difficult task. You can never reproduce exactly the original because every language has its own unique features. Certain words have connotations in one language that they will lack in another. Even allowing for being able to reproduce word for word the exact denotations of the words of another language, the music of the words themselves will be lost. Analogously, if you played certain notes on a piano, playing the same notes on a guitar or a saxophone would be different because the tone of the instrument and the quality of its sound are different. When you hear the word *Adam*, you easily hear *adamah* and *dam* which you would never hear in English. The name “Eve” in Hebrew is *khava* whose meaning derives from her being the “mother of all the living” - again a name that implies something of mythological dimensions.

There have been countless commentaries on the opening pages of *Bereshit* throughout the ages. The ways in which people have read these very same words have changed over the centuries and millennia. Some people, such as fundamentalists and certain types of Biblical scholars, are primarily interested in understanding the literal meaning of the text and conjecturing about the original intent of the words. Others are more interested in looking at the texts from a perspective that veers far from the literal meaning. This has been true for at least a couple of thousand years. It's certainly the case that in the Talmud and in Midrashim the commentaries of the text often stray very far afield of the literal meanings of the words.

The idea of *Gan Eden* not only became connected to the idea of the ideal afterlife, but also, naturally, became connected to the messianic era. The idea of the coming of the *mashiakh* (Hebrew for messiah – literally “the anointed one”) has a long history in Judaism and represents an ideal time, a utopian existence, just as the idea of *Gan Eden* does. Though the Torah itself doesn't really talk about the coming of *mashiakh*, various prophets speak of it as do later Jewish thinkers. Even if one doesn't take it literally as some people do, it still remains present as a utopian ideal towards which to work. You can see how the concept has played out in contemporary Jewish life.

Beginning in the late 19th Century both the Zionist movement and the Jewish socialist Bund were movements that hoped to create a utopian society. In terms of the Zionist movement, the Orthodox Jews, particularly at the beginning of the movement, strongly opposed Zionism thinking that it was a secular rather than a “religious” movement and also believing that we had to wait for *mashiakh* to be sent by G!d rather than try to change our destiny ourselves. Of course we know that those fervent Zionists in Europe who made *Aliyah* and returned to our ancient homeland survived World War II and the overwhelming majority of the Orthodox Jews who waited for *mashiakh* were killed. After the Six Day War, a different kind of Orthodox Jew became more visible in Israel under the influence of Rabbi Tzvi Yehudah Kook, the son of Avraham Yitzkhak HaKohen Kook (the first “chief Rabbi” of “Palestine”). Tzvi Yehudah was the head of a very influential Yeshivah in Jerusalem called Mossad HaRav Kook and was a very fervent messianist seeing the conquering of the territories in the West Bank, the ancient Biblical Lands of Yehudah and Shomron, as portents of the messianic days. Consequently many of these ultra-orthodox people became settlers in these areas hoping to hasten the coming of *mashiakh*.

Returning to the idea of understanding the Torah at different levels. Back in the late 1200s there arose a term for interpreting the Torah on four different levels. The term was *PaRDeS*. The word was an acronym for four different levels of understanding the meaning of the Torah text. The “P” stood for “*Pshat*” the plain or literal meaning of the text. The “R” stood for *Remez*, that which is hinted at in the text. The “D” stood for *Drash*, the type of deeper reading that characterizes *Midrash*, a word that shares the same root implying an exegesis of the text that goes way beyond the literal. Finally we have the “S” which stands for *Sod*, the hidden, secret meaning of the text, the realm that Kabbalah and earlier forms of Jewish mysticism sought out. In fact the term *Pardes* is a rare word in Hebrew, probably a loan word that comes from Persian and which appears only a few times in the Bible, I believe only in the Song of Songs and literally means “orchard.” However, the word figures prominently in a classic Talmudic story of the four rabbis who enter the *Pardes* which is clearly referring to the realm of mystical contemplation in the Talmudic story. The hero of the story is Rabbi Akiva, probably the best known rabbi in the Talmud. You can hear that the term *Pardes* conjures up the sense of *Gan Eden*, the ideal existence.

One last Gan Eden story. There were two trees mentioned in the story. There is so much that can be said about the story with the serpent (*Nakhash* in Hebrew), and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and the fruit which was eaten. (By the way, nowhere in the Torah does it say what the fruit was. I don’t know where the idea that it was an apple came from. Rashi, the best known Biblical commentator said it was a fig, based on the fact that the fig tree was what Adam and Eve took for clothing when they realized they were naked). In addition to the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, there was the Tree of Life which was mentioned. There were also two sets of the Ten Commandments that Moses received. The Torah that we have is filled with “positive” and “negative” Mitzvot (248 Positive and 365 Negative). An example of the “positive” is “honor your mother and father” or “keep Shabbat.” An example of the “negative” is “don’t steal” or “don’t bear false witness.” So there’s a teaching that goes that nowadays we have the Torah that derives from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, but when *mashiakh* comes we’ll have the Torah that derives from the Tree of Life. One last thought to chew on regarding the eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge – which sounds like it was not a good thing in the story – but, truly, are we better off with the Knowledge of Good and Evil

or are we not? Isn't it a story of becoming adult human beings at the same time? Shabbat Shalom.