



Around the Shabbat Table

Bereshit 5763

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Shalom!

Introduction

There are several familiar and important themes that appear in this week's *parasha*. Some of these themes are as fundamental to other religions as they are to Judaism.

The first is God's creation of our world, including the heaven, earth, and every living thing, including humanity. This theme creates some disagreement among those who subscribe to the scientific theory of the "big bang," which posits that between 10 and 20 billion years ago, all matter was concentrated in a single piece, and exploded in the "big bang." At least a billion years later, matter began to take shape, forming the sun, stars, and planets, including our solar system. Our earth with its skies, oceans and land, filled with plants, forests, and, eventually, intelligent life forms: humanity.

In the creation stories of other cultures, creation results from the whims of many gods, the sun, moon, winds and other natural phenomenon. The decisions of these gods were seen as arbitrary. The Jewish people introduced the concept that human life is the result of a single act of God's will, with humanity created in God's image.

The second theme (which follows directly from this) is that humanity has free will, along with the responsibility to do what is right. Jewish tradition teaches us that we are partners with God in shaping life and preserving the world, which the Torah teaches us, is inherently "good." We are responsible for the survival of all that was created by God, as well as being responsible to one another for the survival of humanity.

The third theme, the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, presents us with a moral lesson for today. God commanded Adam and Eve that "of every tree in the garden you may freely eat, but as for the tree of knowledge of good and evil -- you must not eat from it, for on the day you eat of it you shall surely die."

The Garden of Eden was a great, beautiful and marvelous place to live; in which all of Adam and Eve's needs were met and satisfied. Adam and Eve know of God's warnings, as we see from Eve's words to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the other trees. It is only the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said: 'You shall not eat of it or touch it, lest you die.'"

The forbidden fruit held a mystique and allure which tests the mettle of the soul. Man is driven to have more and more, especially that which is forbidden, or is just beyond our reach. Thus, we are presented with a modern lesson. Recently, we have seen many respected men and women of power beyond our ability to dream. They were living in the Garden of Eden of corporate life. All their needs were met and life for them included such benefits as mansions, unlimited expense accounts, custom cars, private planes, and travel to exotic places that could be considered to match the grandeur of the biblical Garden. Like Adam and Eve, they were drawn to reach beyond the law of the land to take what they knew was forbidden. They knew the consequences, but believed they were above the law to eat of the forbidden fruit.

The desires of Adam and Eve at the time of creation and the greed and envy of today's man share a common thread. God asks Eve "What is this that you have done?" Eve replies, "The serpent tricked me and I ate", taking no responsibility (Gen. 3:11-13). The many giants of industry, under scrutiny for abuse of privilege also answer, "It isn't me...It was my subordinates, the accountants and managers and their conspiracies of corporate leadership that are at fault." In truth, the fault is the frailty of the human mind that succumbs to the temptations of pleasures beyond our need. God presents us with a tree of knowledge of good and evil. We are presented with choices leading us to high endeavors and those that test us. The Torah teaches us to understand the consequences of our choices and decisions.

The fourth and final theme of this *parasha* is about the preciousness of human life. In this section of the *parasha* we hear the question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" The Torah teaches us that we are obligated to be concerned about the health and welfare and safety of other human beings.

Questions for Your Family's Discussion

As your family shares a meal this Friday night, you might want to discuss the following questions:

1. What does the saying "He's like a snake in the grass" mean to you? Have you ever been influenced by someone to do something wrong, even though you might be sorry for it later?
2. What does the snake in the grass refer to? What might its source in the Bible be?
3. Every day, we read about pollution and the need to preserve the earth. What steps can you take to make the earth a healthier place to live?

4. Temptation is one emotion that is hard to control. What helps you to do what is right, and avoid the temptation to do an evil deed?

A Text to Wrestle With

In the parasha, a conflict between the brothers Cain and Abel leads to Abel's murder. The Biblical text tells us:

- ☆ And it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him. And the LORD said unto Cain: 'Where is Abel thy brother?' And he said: 'I know not; am I my brother's keeper?' (Genesis 4:8-9).

Are we our brother's keeper? Are you responsible for others? Why, and under what conditions?

Towards an Action Agenda

The issue of greed in the business world is one of great concern. Here are some ways that you can learn and do more about it:

- ☆ Did you know that there has been a Jewish "take" on business ethics and law, dating back to biblical times? Take a walk through an online library of Jewish business ethics at <http://besr.org/library/>
- ☆ You can receive a weekly Jewish ethical question, with suggested responses via e-mail. Subscribe to The Jewish Ethicist at <http://besr.org/ethicist/>
- ☆ Read what President Bush had to say about corporate greed and wrongdoing at <http://www.cnn.com/2002/ALLPOLITICS/07/09/bush.transcript/index.html>
- ☆ Read the president's plans for enhancing corporate responsibility, then send him an e-mail with your opinion at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/corporateresponsibility/>



Shabbat Shalom!

Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site. Simply respond with your thoughts and ideas to RavADS@bjeny.org

If there is any way we can be of service, please contact Rabbi Arnold D. Samlan at the BJE Nassau Queens Center, 516-876-6535, or see our web site: <http://www.bjeny.org/>

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