

Bereishit, 5781

Rabbi Zev Wiener

Cloaked in deceptively simplistic garb, the story of the Garden of Eden is the story of how things really are; of the purity of our essence, the externality of evil, and the trauma of sin. Prior to encountering the serpent, Adam and Eve lived harmoniously in sync with G-d and with nature: there was no conflict, nothing to hide physically or emotionally, and a sense of oneness between them and all of existence. But after betraying their inner compass and succumbing to an externally imposed argument, they become suddenly confused, ashamed, and distant from G-d and each other. Chaos ensues, and they are inherently unable to remain in the Garden. At its core, the underlying failure of Adam and Eve stemmed from something quite simple: they forgot their connection to G-d, and therefore forgot what their life was all about. In turn, the more that we internalize this most ancient of stories, the more we unlock the meaning of our own existence.

The Talmud (Niddah 30) teaches that we enter this world as a pure G-dly soul, sent with a specific mission of righteousness and purity; but upon birth, we forget who we are and why we are here. We awaken into an unfamiliar physical world with a tabula rasa, cast into a particular role to play. Judaism teaches that our life's purpose is to reconnect with our forgotten true self and live in accordance with its will, which is ultimately to fulfill the Divine will. But this is no easy task

Indeed, the pressure to forget who we are and why we are here is immense. We live in a world that, by its very physical nature, distracts us from our G-dly essence and purpose. Like a covert spy who assumes a false identity in a foreign country, only to become so habituated to this role that he forgets that he is actually a spy, we too grow comfortably into our superficial role in this world, losing sight of who we really are, and the missions we have come to fulfill during our temporary stay. We begin to take existence at face value, becoming excessively preoccupied with trivial minutiae, ignoring the finitude of time, and losing sight of the big picture of life. This result is brought about primarily through the inner voice of the Yetzer HaRa, personified by the serpent, which tries to endlessly confuse us regarding who we are and what we want -- just as it did to Adam and Eve.

When we forget who we really are, we fall into confusion, depression, and loneliness. We act with cruelty and divisiveness, seeing others as separate from

ourselves as opposed to a part of a unified whole. We cheat, we steal, and we harm others and ourselves, thinking that these actions represent our true will. We become unhealthily attached to the physicality of this world, which can never truly satiate our deeper cravings. And we develop an immense fear of death -- just as G-d warned would happen after eating from the Tree of Knowledge -- falsely perceiving death as our final end.

But when we live with a clear awareness of our true essence, we are empowered and ennobled, and become one with all of creation. We serve G-d with a sense of genuine love, recognizing that His will is actually our will, as the Mishnah (Avot 2:4) teaches, “Make His will your will, so that He will make your will His will.” We tap into an otherwise unrecognized strength that we contain within ourselves to accomplish goodness -- recognizing that we are capable of so much more than we could ever imagine. We see that at every stage of life, no matter how old or young we may be, our lives are never meaningless or pointless, as there is always a Divine mission we intrinsically desire to be accomplishing. Indeed, the nihilistic purposelessness and boredom of the existentialists has no place in the life of a person who lives in touch with his or her G-dly essence. And, in maintaining our accurate sense of self, we recognize that we will never actually die, as our soul -- our true self -- lives eternally.

All of Torah is the quest to live true to who you really are. To reconnect to the Edenic consciousness that you possessed before you entered this world, and to make it manifest in a world that attempts to obscure it. Sin blocks our soul, confusing us and distancing us from ourselves. When we sin, we have by definition forgotten who we are. It is after we sin that G-d calls out to us, as He did to Adam, “אַיִכָּה” -- “where are you?”¹ Where is the pristine soul that was sent to this world to fulfill a lofty mission? That essence has suddenly become unrecognizable. It is not coincidental that the same letters, “אַיִכָּה” -- “alas,” introduces the book of our exile, Megillat Eichah. There is no greater exile than the exile from one's true self that occurs with sin.

As we embark upon a new year of Torah study, we would do well to remind ourselves of the foundational role that Torah plays in our life. Both the Garden of Eden and the Torah (housed in the Temple's Sacred Ark) were protected by כַּרְוּבִים -- winged angels. This parallel is not coincidental. Through Torah study, we can gain access to the spiritual Garden of Eden, by purifying our minds and hearts to live in sync with our truest

¹ See Rabbi David Aaron, Endless Light, ch 8

will. And in doing so, we will be blessed to live a life that is faithful to our world, our G-d, and ourselves.