

D'rash – B'reishit – 10/14/23

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I think this is the first time I've ever given a d'rash on this parsha, and there's obviously a lot here – including a few especially obscure and antique fragmentary verses that are interesting because they seem so completely foreign to us.

But I want to focus on something that is not so unfamiliar, the Adam and Eve story.

I have to say, as an aside, that the Adam and Eve story always brings to my mind a Far Side cartoon where Eve, looking quizzical, is holding the apple out to the serpent, who seems perplexed. The serpent says, "I don't know – I mean, I guess it's been washed."

But the Adam and Eve story is not in the Torah as a source for 20th Century humor, and my question today is: Why is it in here?

What do I mean? In context, the Adam and Eve story seems almost entirely extraneous. It contradicts the Torah's opening creation story in many ways. Many modern readers prefer the first creation story, but so did our forebears. Adam and Eve, and their story, do not loom large in Jewish tradition. They are rarely mentioned in the liturgy and are not central to Jewish theology. The first creation story essentially gives us Shabbat – a centerpiece of Jewish thought and culture – the Adam and Eve story mostly gives us interpretive headaches.

But perhaps most of all, it struck me this time that the feel of the story is at odds with almost the entire rest of the Torah.

The story is, in the end, a tale of loss – of a golden age, of innocence, of paradise. It is a story that seems meant to evoke a sense of loss, of a fall, of a vague nostalgia (which literally means pain for home).

This is a fundamental contrast with the rest of the Torah, which looks forward almost militantly. Indeed, it is sometimes argued that Judaism's signal contribution to human thought was the notion that time moves forward; that it's not just an endless cycle – and that we need to march forward with it. The overarching metaphor and goal in the Torah is for Israelites to reach a promised land, not to return to an imagined past.

Even when the Torah gets misty-eyed with thoughts of loss – in its closing verses on Moses' death, for example – the message is to move forward. We aren't told where Moses is buried; we can't go to his gravesite. And the rabbis talk about how the opening letter of the Torah, the beth, faces into the text, brackets it as if to say we're not to cast our eyes back.

Yes, Judaism is concerned with – even obsessed with – history and remembrance, but as a way to gird us for the future, not to create a longing for the past.

So why was this story included?

Whatever the specifics may be, to me its inclusion raises the question of whether humans are capable of telling – of processing – a story that lacks some sense of a lost golden age.

If not, there could be many reasons for that. The existence of a lost but better time may be a kind of proof text for the idea that the world is – and we are – capable of being better, whatever our current circumstances. The existence of a supposedly positive past may give solidity to a misty promise of a better future.

Or maybe that story arc is just wired into us as we recall the sweet simplicity of childhood. Or perhaps it just reflects a healthy wariness of a kind of entropy in the universe. But whatever its appeal, the idea of a lost Eden seems hard to fully escape.

Yet the Torah was probably wise to try (most of the time). Mythologies of a golden past can set unrealistic ideals or cause a fixation on the past that stymies progress. (Today, though, we are also faced with the equally problematic tendency to view the past with contempt.)

Still, we seem to fall naturally into this mode of story-telling – in our history, in our own lives. And even the redactors of the Torah couldn't keep this story out.

So, some questions to think about:

- What would the Torah be like for us without the Adam and Eve story?
- How do we react to stories of an Edenic past, in general?
- To what extent do we find ourselves constructing such narratives, and why?