

Bereishit 5779

Adam's Choice

My teacher Rabbi Brad Shavit Artson remarks that the Torah puts something new into itself every year for us to discover. As I turned once again to this morning's parashah, that something leapt out at me as if it had never been there before. Let me share with you what I discovered.

I was reading the curses that God pronounces after the human beings eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. In particular, this is Eve's punishment:

*"I will make most severe
your pangs in childbearing
In pain shall you bear children.
Yet your desire shall be for your husband
And he shall rule/master over you."
[ve-el ishekh teshukatekh/ve-hu yimshol bakh] - p.20*

To say this is an ugly curse is an understatement. It relates partly to Eve's body and partly to her relationships. As far as her body is concerned, all of the traditional commentators understand the language of the curse to apply to multiple painful dimensions of womanhood - not only childbearing itself but also menstruation [Sforno], sex [Ibn Ezra] morning sickness [Rashi] and the difficulties of motherhood [also Rashi]. And the relationship part portrays for us, in six curt Hebrew words, a lifetime of a kind of masochistic submission - drawn over and over again to her husband/man, Eve is always to be the secondary partner in the relationship, the sole subject of an inescapable king who may or may not rule with mercy as well as justice. As Ibn Ezra puts it: *You will listen to what he commands you because you are part of his domain to do with as he wishes.*

And that on its own would be bad enough. But I'm afraid it's worse. If we look forward in the story to the key moment between Cain and Abel, Eve's first two children, we find a cliffhanger in which Cain is warned that he has choices:

*Surely if you do right
there is uplift
but if you do not do right
Sin crouches at the door
Its desire is towards you
yet you can be its master.
[ve-elekha teshukato/ve-ata timshol bo] - p.25*

The final part of Cain's warning is an almost exact echo of the second part of Eve's curse, with desire and mastery once again intertwined. This can't be a coincidence; what is it supposed to mean?

To answer that question we need to look at what Rashi, the first of the great medieval commentators, has to say about Cain's warning. His comment is very short: *ke-tirgumo perusho* - this means what the Targum, the first Aramaic translation of the Torah, says it means.

Follow me closely please: here is the Targum of Cain's curse:

*If your deed is good, your punishment will be averted,
But if your deed is not good then your sin will be stored up in the World to Come
for the Day of Judgment.
Do not let your heart become evil; sin is lounging around
But the power of the Evil Urge [yetzer ha-ra] has been given into your hand.
It desires you, but you have mastery over it
whether for good or for sin.*

In other words, Rashi is saying that Cain's moral battle - his choice to do good or to do evil - is against an urge or a desire that is lounging around at every moment. (The language is seductive - elsewhere in the Tanakh that lounging, or crouching, suggests various types of illicit and/or illegal sexual activity.) Sin lurks in the doorway like a temptress, awakening the most basic and crude of human appetites in the form of the *yetzer ha-ra*, the urge to do evil. But this urge - even though it desires Cain - can be mastered. Cain may still choose what to do.

If Cain is to be the master in this scenario, just like his father is to be the master of his mother - then it follows that the sin lounging in the doorway and the desire it awakens must both be Eve herself. The temptress, the seductress, the awakener of the urge to do evil - there she is sprawling on the threshold in all her flagrant womanhood. As in so many other cases, the flip side of the mother is the whore. Eve's curse - no more and no less - is to become the personification of the *yetzer ha-ra*, always beckoning, always tempting, to be succumbed to or mastered as the one who rules over her decides. Either way, she will lose.

Let's pause here for a moment and just consider how Eve's curse and these two versions of womanhood - the suffering mother and the lounging seductress - pervade our culture. From Freud's Madonna/whore complex to the doorways of Amsterdam's red light district, from the cartoon of the 'perfect mom' to the derision leveled at women who struggle to balance work and home - in literature, in art, in film, all over the internet - we have not escaped from Eve's curse. It is embedded in us. It is the default of the way we think about women, about men and about power.

And because it is so pervasive, we forget that it was actually a curse to begin with. We believe it is reality.

But - and here is the new thing the Torah offered me this year - Adam does not.

Adam is also cursed after he has eaten from the tree. Like Eve, his curse has two parts. In the inverse of Eve's curse [chiasmus], the relationship part is stated first - he will be betrayed by the earth from which he was first taken. And then comes the part about his body - it is mortal now, it will die.

After the curses were pronounced, we can imagine that there was a silence. Into that silence falls Adam's reaction.

Does he reject the one who seduced him and demand a replacement? Does he use his newly conferred mastery to punish the partner he has - does he hit her, subdue her, rape her, even? Does he use his previous authority over the newly created world to destroy the tree that caused so much trouble in the first place? Does he rail at God?

He does none of those things. Instead:

The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all the living.

This verse represents a critical lesson from the Torah.

Adam names his wife. To name something - to give it a *shem* - is to perceive its true essence. Adam looks at Eve and perceives not ignominy, not submission, not an object to be ruled over, not a seductress or a temptress but the power of life itself. Her body that will bear children, her desire for him, even the power that might have over him, are all admirable. Her capacity to bear life is miraculous. We can imagine the respect that shone from his eyes.

It is as if he truly sees her for the very first time.

Adam refuses to accept the projections and limitations that have been placed on Eve. He fights back against the curse. He looks beyond its pain and its threats and affirms life instead.

And that resistance will bear fruit. Even though the curse - in the way that curses do - will rear its head, bloodily, in the next generation, Adam's connection to Eve and his tender perception of her will indeed create the child that is placed - as his name, *shet* suggests - to be the ancestor of everything that comes after.

How does Adam's choice still speak to us today? For one thing, it tells us that a curse is never the only way to understand reality. For another, it reminds us that stereotypes are only as strong as the perceptions that maintain them.

But most of all, we should notice that the first conscious, free choice a human being ever makes - the first one in the whole of reality whose terms are not dictated by any external rule - is to respect another human being; to see beyond projections and limitations and to choose a real relationship.

And that lesson is one we should never stop learning.

Shabbat shalom.