The Beast that Crouches at the Door: 
Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and Beyond.

by Rabbi David Fohrman

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Serpents of Desire: Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden. An Introduction

Beyond the Lullaby Effect: Reading the Bible with open eyes.

Paradoxically enough, a big problem we have in studying the Bible is that the stories are so familiar to us. No matter where you grew up, no matter what level of education you've had, you've come across the story of Adam and Eve tens, if not hundreds, of times. We've heard the story in school, and we've learned it at home. We drink "Adam and Eve" apple juice, and see Adam and Eve icons on shampoo bottles. We know that story, we assure ourselves. Indeed, we know the story too well for our own good.

When we know a story "too well", we become easy prey to a syndrome I like to call "The Lullaby Effect". The lullaby effect retards our ability to ask -- even to see -- the really important questions that the Bible begs us to ask of it. The "Lullaby Effect" anesthetizes us through the stupefying effects of familiarity. Here's how it works:

When was the last time you bothered thinking about the words of the lullabies you sing to your children. Stop for a moment and think -- really think -- about what their words actually mean. For starters, try that perennial favorite of ours, "Rock-a-bye baby on the treetop". Imagine your child was actually paying attention: "....when the bough breaks, the cradle will fall, and down will come baby, baby and all..."

Now, you can certainly get a kid to sleep by singing this. But if your sweet child was actually listening to what you were singing, she'd be in for a rude awakening. Lots of questions, I imagine, would quickly come to mind. If we bothered listening, they would come to our mind, too:

"Exactly how far off the ground was the cradle when it fell?"

"Did anyone call 911?"

"Who put the cradle on the bough in the first place?" "Was the parent trying to get rid of the child?" "Are you trying to get rid of me?"

But no one asks these questions. Few of us are even remotely disturbed by the violence that gushes from us when we sing our children to sleep. Why? Because we've simply stopped listening to the words. We have heard them too many times. We heard them as children before we even knew what they meant; and now, even as adults, they fail to shock us.

Biblical stories are a lot like lullabies in that way. Almost every major Biblical story has its "elephant in the room" -- some major problem, or a series of them, that cries out to be addressed. "Why would God tell Abraham to take his son and kill him, only to retract at the last moment and say He didn't really mean it?" What, exactly, did God have against the building of a Tower in the Land of Babel? Why would God bother bargaining with Pharaoh to let the Jews go, only to harden his heart once the Egyptian monarch finally agreed?

But the stories are too familiar to us. We've heard about them so many times, they've become part of our cultural fabric. We soak in the stories through osmosis, the way we unthinkingly develop accents that reflect the place in which we grew up. We fail to see the problems anymore.

In this series of articles, I'd like to challenge us to change that. I want to ask you to come along with me on a journey; an adventure in Biblical text in which we read these stories that we thought we knew with fresh eyes, and ask the questions that any intelligent reader would ask about them.

If this idea makes you nervous, relax. We needn't fear these questions, for they are not really problems; they are opportunities. They are windows that the text gives us to begin to perceive its deeper meaning. Sure, you can keep the window closed and pretend it isn't there. But if you don't open it, the treasure that lays beyond -- a richer, three dimensional understanding of the Bible, not to mention an entire world of rabbinic literature -- Midrash and Talmud -- will remain sealed off to you forever.

So here's the deal:
Before reading these essays, I invite you to re-read the story of Adam, Eve and the Serpent in the Garden of Eden. Read it in the Hebrew, if you know Hebrew -- and if you don't, read it in translation; for the time being, any translation will do. Yes, I know: You know the story already -- ever since sixth grade, you've had this image in your mind of the snake wound around the tree, offering Eve an apple. But that's precisely the point. You need to forget all that. You need to erase those images and read the story anew. You need to break the lullaby syndrome.

Read the story slowly and carefully. Just the text; no commentaries. And as you do, ask yourself these questions: If I was reading this for the first time, what about it would strike me as strange? What are the "big questions" that the Torah wants me to ask about this story? What are the elephants in the room?

Take some time to think about it.

Adam, Eve and the Elephant in the Room - Serpents of Desire, Part 1

The boxer named Desire.

Last week, we talked about three moral dilemmas -- one of which, I argued, was a phantom.

"Is it okay to take the dying man off the respirator?"

"My elderly mother needs help organizing her house before she moves -- but my kid needs me to help him prepare for finals. Who do I spend the evening with?"

"Should Billy lie to the teacher to protect his friend Bobby, when the teacher asks him whether Bobby was cheating on his test?"

It's a dark and rainy night in Manhattan. You throw your trusty Chevy Suburban into reverse and begin to back out of your parking spot, when you hear a sickening thud. You get out of the car to behold, right behind you, a shiny black Lexus convertible -- with a badly dented front end. You look around. The street is entirely dark, not a soul to be seen. Do you leave a note or not?

Well, did you find the impostor?

If you identified the illusory dilemma as the last one -- the dark and rainy night in Manhattan -- then you and I are on the same page. If you didn't -- well, we can still be friends. But in any case, here's my thinking:

The first three dilemmas share a certain, basic quality. They are choices between competing ideals. Each ideal is worthy or noble in its own right, and the dilemma arises only because the two ideals are forced to compete with one another.

For example, take our respirator case: Everybody agrees that prolonging a life is a noble thing, and everyone agrees that improving the quality of a life is also noble -- but what happens when you are forced to choose between the two? And consider Bobby and Billy. Honesty and loyalty are both things worth fighting for. But when each value leads you in a different direction, which one wins out? And so it is with mom and the kids: I have obligations towards both these relatives; how do I weigh my competing obligations?

All these choices are genuine. There are two "boxers in the ring", as it were -- two competing values -- and the question is: Which boxer wins? Which value is dominant? How does my Creator expect me to act?

But let's turn now to the last case: It's that dark and rainy night in Manhattan, and am I pondering whether I am going to leave that note. Let's try and identify the competing "ideals" here. Well, first we have honesty. Honesty says leave the note. Okay, now where's the counter-argument? Think carefully...

There is none.

One second. If there's no second ideal, you might ask, then how come it's such a struggle to figure out what to do? It should be a no-brainer. There's only one "boxer". Shouldn't he win by forfeit?

The answer is: There is indeed another boxer here. But it's not an ideal. It's a boxer named desire.

A BOXER NAMED DESIRE
In this last dilemma, the battle is being waged between an ideal -- honesty -- and what you would rather do. The two boxers are simply named: Honesty vs. the fact that you don't want to leave the note.

That, of course, is not how your brain presents things to you, though. Let's listen in on our internal dialogue as you inspect the mangled front end of the Lexus and wrestle with your decision:

"You know, I really should leave that note... But... one second -- before I do that, do I really know for sure that I'm the one who made that dent? I mean, sure I heard a noise when I backed up, but maybe I just ran over a soda can in the gutter or something. And I just tapped that Lexus anyway; could I really have made such a big dent?

Boy, I sure would be a sucker if that car was already dented and I left a note. Anyway, what business did he have parking his toy so near my truck? What a fool I'd be to leave him a note. Look, it's not like he'll be out any money or anything. Heck, his insurance company will pay. That what's uninsured motorist insurance is for, isn't it?..."

By the time you're done, you've convinced yourself that it would be positively virtuous to just walk away. It's Robin Hood, vs. the Big Insurance corporations; it's the little guy vs. the rich and arrogant; it's you vs. your own naivete -- why, you wouldn't be so naive as to think he would leave you a note if he was the one who hit you?

But it's all a sham. All those "boxers" are phantoms. The real name of the second boxer is simply desire.

Welcome to the world of "good and evil".

THE MIND-GAMES OF DESIRE

A fascinating Midrash echoes this idea. The last time I quoted a Midrash in this space, I got a lot of incredulous comments from readers -- so a quick word to the wise: The ancient rabbinic commentary known as Midrash generally speaks in the language of allegory, and it often intentionally cloaks its message in outlandish garb. [Traditional commentators from Luzzatto to Maharal have rarely taken the statements of the Midrash literally.] The trick is to read between the lines and to piece together what the sages are driving at. So take a deep breath, and try this one on for size:

The sages of the Midrash state that after a person dies, the Heavenly court allows him to view his Evil Inclination -- his "yetzer hara," as it were. The sages go on to say that if the person was righteous in his lifetime, his Evil Inclination appears to him as a mountain, and if he was wicked, it appears to him as a lowly hill. In either case, the person is astonished: The first person is amazed that he managed to surmount the mountain, while the latter is astonished that such a measly hill deterred him.

What do the sages mean to say here? At first blush, their teaching is counterintuitive. If anything, one would have expected the reverse: Wasn't the wicked person tormented by the "mountain," by roiling desires he found impossible to subdue? And wasn't the righteous person the one with the tamer sense of personal desire, the mere "hill"?

A friend once suggested to me an interesting explanation: Perhaps the difference between a righteous person and a wicked one is not so much that one has a greater or more intense yetzer hara than the other; it's that by and large, the wicked person succumbed to that yetzer hara whereas the righteous person didn't. And that changes what each sees when he looks backward: The righteous person sees desire that has not yet been sated, whereas the wicked person sees what desire looks like after one has given into it.

When desire is yet to be satiated, it looks like a mountain. Just before you eat the chocolate macadamia fudge tort, you can't imagine anything more delicious. But through the rear view mirror, desire gives a different appearance. Once you've finished off the last crumbs, the mountain is gone, and you see reality for what it really is: The tort tasted good for all of thirty seconds, and now you've got two hours ahead of you in the gym to work it off.

Such are the pitfalls of subjectivity. In the post-tree world of "good and evil", a dilemma is born on the rainy streets of Manhattan. Desire, for all its size and power, dwells unseen within ourselves, hiding easily behind "phantom boxers". In this world of subjectivity, evil can get dressed up in pretty clothes -- and when it does, it's hard to know the difference between that which is truly virtuous and compelling, and that which is merely seductive.

THE BEGINNINGS OF DESIRE

The snake's argument, perhaps, stands as a living example of this kind of seductiveness masquerading as virtue. Like that rainy night in Manhattan, the choice whether to eat from the tree or not may have seemed to Adam and Eve like a legitimate dilemma:

"Which 'voice' of God do I listen to? The desire inside me, or the voice that commands me with words?"

It seems like a reasonable enough question. And there were good reasons, perhaps, to advocate partaking from this tree of desire. There were good reasons to think it would be right and good and laudable to bring desire into our lives more powerfully than before. After all, the snake is not altogether wrong about instinct and desire constituting the "voice of God". Passion does come from God, and experiencing it seems to be an essential part of what makes us human. What would it be like to wake up in the morning with no sense of ambition, or to look at a spectacular sunset without a sense of yearning? What if
great art seemed humdrum; if romance was wooden and unappealing; if poetry failed to stir our souls? We can well ask if life would still be worth living.

To some extent, passion is the very stuff of life.

It's all very reasonable, isn't it? But like that rainy night in Manhattan, there's a sub-text to this dilemma. The intellectual arguments mask another agenda. Even as Adam and Eve stood in the world of true and false, the world of "good and evil" beckoned to us, and desire began to assert its subtle influence.

The astute reader will notice that when Eve paraphrases to the serpent God's command to avoid the Tree, she changes a few nuances in the command. At face value, the changes seem fairly innocuous. For example, Eve identifies the tree she and Adam must avoid as being in the "center of the Garden". But if you go back to chapter two, you'll see that this wasn't where the forbidden tree was really located....

If you look at the verses carefully, and you'll find that this is not the only change she makes -- there are actually a whole bunch of other ones as well. Which brings me to your homework assignment: Get out those number two pencils and see if you can make a list of these discrepancies over the coming days. "In what ways did Eve mis-communicate God's restriction?" Now, when you've got your list together, ask yourself: Why did Eve change these details?

Well, it's possible, of course, that Eve was the unfortunate victim of a communications failure. She wasn't created yet when the original command to avoid the tree was given, and maybe Adam repeated it inaccurately to her. Maybe. But it's also possible that something else was afoot.

Look carefully and see if you think there is any pattern to the various discrepancies between the original command and Eve's paraphrase of it.

I, for one, think such a pattern exists. Crack open your Bible, and see if you agree with me.

Why would God want to withhold a knowledge of good and evil from us?

Okay, you've taken some time to re-read the story of Adam, Eve and the Snake. Hopefully, you've read it with fresh eyes, and asked yourself that very basic of questions: "What is strange about this picture?" Before getting to your conclusions, let's take a moment to revisit the basic storyline together. In a nutshell, here it is:

After creating a world, God fashions two human beings and places them in paradise, the Garden of Eden. He gives them virtually free reign over the territory. There's only one restriction: A certain tree is off-limits -- it's the tree labeled "the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil". The fruit of this tree must not be eaten under any circumstances.

In short order, the human beings manage to transgress the only prohibition given to them. At the behest of a mysterious snake, Eve eats from the tree and shares the fruit with Adam. The Almighty becomes angry, and hands out various punishments: The snake? No more walking upright for him; he must crawl on his belly and eat dust. The woman? Generations of her kind will endure pain in conception and childbirth. And the man? He and his progeny will have to work by the sweat of their brow to make bread. And just to round things out, death gets handed out to all the parties; nobody gets to live forever anymore.

Eden is placed off-limits; everyone has got to find somewhere else to live now. The great Lifeguard in the sky has blown His whistle and it's time for everybody to get out of the pool. Why? Because there's another mysterious tree in the Garden -- the Tree of Life -- and the last thing God wants is anyone taking anything from that tree...

Well, what are the problems here? Does the story sit well with you, or do you find yourself uneasy with it? If you are uneasy, can you identify exactly why you are uneasy?

As I mentioned earlier, many Biblical stories have their "elephant in the room": An obvious, slap-in-the-face question that is so basic and so deeply troubling that until you find a way to deal with it, you really can't claim to have any understanding at all f the story you are reading. Is there a question of this sort -- a question of this magnitude -- that we need to deal with when reading the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden?

I think there is.

Let's talk a little bit about this mysterious tree in the Garden, the one that God places off-limits. It has a name. It is known as "the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil". By any measure, that's a pretty strange name for a tree -- but if that's what the Bible calls it, then that's presumably what it is: It somehow conveys a "knowledge of Good and Evil," an ability to distinguish right from wrong to those who partake of its fruits.

But there's a big problem with this. In a sentence, it is this:

"Why would God want to deny this knowledge to people?"

Think about it. Are human beings better or worse off, for their knowledge of "good and evil"? Is knowing right from wrong an asset or a liability for humanity?
Imagine a world in which people were pretty much the same as they are now -- they were smart, they could walk, they could talk, they could drive cars and become investment bankers. They were missing only one thing. They didn't know right from wrong.

We have a word for people like that. We call them sociopaths.

A person with all the faculties we associate with humanity except for the capacity to understand right and wrong is someone who could slaughter people with an axe the way you and I mow the lawn. Did God really want to create a society filled with such people? Clearly, people are better off when they know the difference between right and wrong. So why would God pretend that having such knowledge is undesirable?

A tempting way out of the problem would be to suggest that somehow, it was all a set-up: God really did want people to have the knowledge the tree would give them, and was in fact "glad" when they ate from it. But this approach is deeply problematic. For the way the Torah tells the story, the Almighty seems pretty disappointed with Adam and Eve after they ate from the tree; he in fact punishes them severely. How are we to understand this disappointment? It seems a little perverse to imagine the Almighty secretly chuckling with pleasure that Adam and Eve finally ate the fruit he put off limits - but hiding His joy behind a mask of displeasure and anger.

Clearly, God really did want Adam and Eve to avoid the Tree of Knowledge. But that brings us back to our question: Why would the Lord want to deny humanity an understanding of good and evil?

CATCH-22 IN THE GARDEN

The truth is, the question is really even a little deeper than this. It's not simply that it seems strange for God to have put a "tree of knowledge" off-limits to Adam and Eve. Rather, the very existence of such a tree seems to create a basic contradiction in the story as a whole. Here's why:

What happens immediately after Adam and Eve eat from the tree whose mysterious fruits confer knowledge of "good and evil"? The Almighty becomes angry with them and punishes them. But if Adam and Eve were punished for what they did, this presupposes that they knew they did something wrong. You don't punish people who are unaware that they did something bad. So Adam and Eve evidently had some knowledge of good and evil before eating from the tree. At the very least, they knew it was right to obey God when He told them not to eat, and it was wrong to disobey Him.

But now we're really stuck. For if Adam and Eve already understood good and evil before reaching for the fruit, well then, they already possessed what the tree was supposed to give them. And that would mean that the tree was useless, nothing but an empty farce.

It's a catch-22.

This is a very serious, fundamental problem. Didn't Adam and Eve already have the knowledge the tree was supposed to give them? It's the kind of question that you should lose sleep over. For as long as you are stuck with this question, the story of Adam and Eve simply fails to make any sense at all.

So how are we to deal with this problem? I'd like to sketch the outline of an approach we may ultimately find useful.

A WORLD BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL

Perhaps we've been the victim of faulty premises. We've casually assumed that we knew what kind of knowledge the Tree gave to Adam and Eve: A knowledge of "good and evil," of "right and wrong." But on second thought, just because it's called a "Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil" doesn't mean that Adam and Eve were ignorant of morality, of right and wrong, beforehand. It just means that they didn't call morality "good and evil." They called it something else.

The approach I am suggesting here is not my own. It in fact is the approach taken by Maimonides, the Rambam. Indeed, in his Guide to the Perplexed, Rambam considers the very same question we have advanced here: Why would God want to withhold a knowledge of good and evil from us? And the answer he gives is this: The tree didn't give us an understanding of right and wrong when we had none before; rather it transformed this understanding from one thing into another. It transformed it into something called a "knowledge of Good and Evil".

If this seems a little obscure, try thinking about it this way: Nowadays, when we do something right, we think of it as "good". And when we do something wrong, we think of it as "evil". But, Rambam contends, those are not the most natural terms one could possibly use. Those terms became relevant to us -- they became part of our vocabulary, as it were - only after we ate from the tree and assimilated "knowledge of good and evil". In the world of Eden, in the world before the Tree, the words "good" and "evil" would have seemed strange and inappropriate. Yes, we would have been aware of right and wrong, but we would not have called this "good and evil". We would have thought about it differently. We would have called it something else.

What, exactly, was that "something else"? What would it mean to think about right and wrong in the world of Eden, in the "pre-tree" world? That, indeed, is the $64,000 question. To some extent, we are reaching beyond ourselves to even ask the question. To ask is to try and understand a world we no longer know; a world in which right and wrong looked, felt and seemed vastly different than they do now. But try we must. For the Torah suggests that it was that world which was the more genuine one. And it is to that world that we strive to return.
Uncovering the nature of right and wrong in the pristine world of Eden will be one of the central tasks before us in the chapters ahead. But before we tackle that, we need to assemble some more data. So for now, it's back to the drawing board: It's time to ask ourselves, once again: What are some of the other problems the story of Adam and Eve holds out to us?

Re-read the text one more time. I'll see you again next week and we'll compare notes once more.

A Tale of Two Trees - Serpents of Desire, Part 2

Mankind's undetermined nature, perched precariously between mortality and immortality.

Until now, we've concentrated on the mysterious "Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil." But there was more than one special tree in the garden. For God also created a second, mysterious tree in Paradise -- the Tree of Life:

> God made grow out of the ground every tree pleasant to look at and good to eat, [including] the Tree of Life in the middle of the garden, and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (Genesis, 2:9).

Throughout the Eden story, the Tree of Life remains tantalizingly in the background. It is created, but then virtually disappears from the discussion. What role does this second tree play in the story, and how are we to understand its meaning?

Although the Tree of Life may be out of sight, it is not out of mind. Towards the end of the story, after Adam and Eve have eaten the forbidden fruit, we once again hear of the mysterious Tree of Life:

> God said, 'Man has now become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now he must be prevented from putting forth his hand and also taking from the Tree of Life. He [can] eat it and live forever!' (3:22).

We have here God's reason for exiling Adam and Eve from Eden. They are sent away to ensure that they will never eat from the Tree of Life. But there's something quite odd about this. For in reading the story, we never find that Adam was told to stay away from the Tree of Life in the first place. If God thought it was such an awful idea for mankind to eat from the Tree of Life, why did He not command them to avoid it, as He did concerning the other special tree, the Tree of Knowledge?

Just to make matters a little worse, let's remember exactly where the Tree of Life was located:

> ...the Tree of Life in the middle of the garden, and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (Genesis, 2:9).

Let's add it all up. The Tree of Life was in the center of the garden, and Adam and Eve were never told to avoid its fruit. Indeed, it is unclear whether they even knew that it was a special tree. Well, what is likely to eventually happen?

Clearly, it's only a matter of time before someone eats from its fruit.

So the plot thickens. Evidently, God didn't mind Adam and Eve eating from the Tree of Life. He apparently even desired that they eventually eat from it. But all that was before eating from the Tree of Knowledge. After eating from the Tree of Knowledge, somehow, everything changes: Now, the Tree of Life becomes off-limits. Every effort must be taken to ensure that mankind never eats from it.

Why? What accounts for this curious relationship between the trees? Why is the Tree of Life fine to eat from before partaking from the Tree of Knowledge, but not after?

That's one point we'll want to get back to. But we're not done yet exploring the mysterious relationship between these two trees. Indeed, we are just beginning.

THE CHERUBS WITH THE FLAMING SWORD

Consider this for a moment:
The angels holding a flaming sword who God sets up to "guard the way [back to] the Tree of Life" (Genesis, 3:24) are of a very particular kind. They are cherubs. (For those of you who enjoy Renaissance art, that's the kind of angel that Rubens always used to like to paint -- although I don't know why he thought he knew what they looked like). Now, as it happens, a Cherub is a relatively rare kind of angel. Throughout the entire Five Books of Moses, we find them in only two places. Besides their appearance here, guarding the Tree of Life, they are mentioned only once more. Paced atop the Holy Ark in the Tabernacle, are two cherubs, fashioned out of gold:

Make two golden cherubs, hammering them out from the two ends [of the ark]... The cherubs shall spread their wings upward so that their wings shield the [ark's] cover... (Exodus 25:18; 25:20).

Now go one step further. What treasure was this second pair of cherubs guarding -- these only other cherubs in the entire Five Books of Moses?

They were guarding the Ten Commandments that were inside the ark. They were guarding the Torah.

For those of you who make it to synagogue on the Sabbath, you should be familiar with the words I am thinking of right now. You say them every week, as the Torah is raised aloft from the bimah so that all can see:

It is a tree of life to all who grab hold of it... (Proverbs 3:18).

Fascinating. The only other time we meet cherubs in the entire Torah, they are once again guarding a "Tree of Life". Only this time, they are not keeping us away from the Tree of Life; they are ushering us towards it, shielding both us and the Torah beneath their protective wings.

What are we to make of this? Why are the cherubs who keep us away from the original Tree of Life trying to give us access to a second such tree? What does it even mean to call the Torah "a Tree of Life"? Is there an essential similarity between the two?

The skeptic inside you might dismiss this all as coincidence. Cherubs here, cherubs there, cherubs everywhere. But the lines that seem to connect the Torah and the Tree of Life go farther and deeper...

DO THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE AND THE TREE OF LIFE CONTRADICT EACH OTHER?

Try this question on for size: What were Adam and Eve like before eating from either tree, the Tree of Knowledge of the Tree of Life? Were they mortal, or immortal?

Let's see what each tree has to say about this. We'll start with the Tree of Knowledge.

We know that Adam was warned not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, because "on the day that you eat from it, you will surely die" (Genesis, 2:17). As the classic commentator Nachmanides suggests, the verse can't mean that the fruit immediately kills you, for in fact, Adam and Eve went on to live for a long time after eating the forbidden fruit. Rather, the verse seems to mean "on the day that you eat from the fruit you will become mortal". I.e. you will immediately become transformed into beings that eventually die. This, apparently, is the meaning of God's warning.

So the Tree of Knowledge seems to answer the question we posed earlier. It proves that Adam and Eve were originally immortal. Right?

Wrong. Because now it's time to look at what the Tree of Life has to say about the question.

The Torah tells us that God banished Adam and Eve from Eden "lest they eat from the Tree of Life and live forever." Well, the verse seems pretty clear about it: The fruit of the Tree of Life confers immortality -- once you eat it, you will never die. So if the Tree of Life makes you immortal -- well, that seems to mean you were mortal beforehand.

But wait a minute. I thought we said just a minute ago that Adam and Eve were originally immortal. Right?

Something fishy is going on with these trees. The Tree of Knowledge seems to tell us that man would originally have lived forever. But the Tree of Life seems to tell us that he was originally a being that would die. At face value, the two trees seem to contradict themselves.

But only at face value. There's a way out of the contradiction. A surprising alternative exists about the original nature of Adam and Eve which would resolve the problem. Stop reading for a second, think about it, and see if you can find the solution.

THE GARDEN OF EDEN AND THE HEISENBERG UNCERTAINTY PRINCIPLE
Here's what I would suggest: Both trees are right. Mankind, before eating from either tree, was neither mortal nor immortal. If he ate from the Tree of Life, he would become immortal; if he ate from the Tree of Knowledge, he would become a being that dies. As for right now, though -- before eating from either tree, he was in the "twilight zone." He was perched precariously between mortality and immortality, but as of yet, his nature was undetermined.

If such an "undetermined state" seems strange to you, don't fret. Just repair to the library and pick up any book on quantum physics. According to this branch of science, it is a pretty standard feature of reality for things to be undetermined. At any one moment, a given electron may be here or it may be there, Heisenberg famously proclaimed, but right now it is neither here nor there. Its position becomes "determined" only once an observer steps in and looks at it. Well, if electrons can remain undetermined -- maybe people can as well.

Now, if we're right about all of this -- that Eden was a place where man was precariously placed between life and death, depending on his choice -- well then, it would seem that Eden eerily foreshadows another great moment of Jewish history. It reminds us of another, later time when we were neither here nor there, and the Almighty offered us a similar choice between "life" and "death":

*See! Today I have set before you [a free choice] between life and good [on one side], and death and evil [on the other]... Now therefore, choose Life!* (Deuteronomy 30:14,19).

When Moses uttered these words, the people stood in the wasteland of a desert, not yet possessing either the "life" or the "death" that lay before them. Once again, we were asked to choose. In this case, "life" was identified as embracing the Torah and its principles, while "death" meant rejecting them.

Strange. The choice to embrace the Torah or reject it is painted with the same brush as the choice to embrace the Tree of Life. The cherubs that guard one Tree guard the other. It might be just a coincidence; a convenient choice of metaphors. But it might also signify something deeper. What could it all mean?

We have a long way to go, but we are starting to get somewhere in developing our picture of the two mysterious trees in Eden. In upcoming weeks, we will try and lay out some other puzzle pieces in the grand saga of Adam and Eve in Eden. And then, once the jigsaw pieces are all out on the floor, we'll begin, bit by bit, to try and discern the picture they seem to reveal.

### The Dark Side of Paradise - Serpents of Desire, Part 3

The Bible is laden with conflicts between characters who exemplify good and evil. And while our sympathies may lie with the character who aligns himself with the "good," he or she is not always the center of the story. Consider, as an example, the narrative of Cain and Abel. The story really isn't about Abel. We know virtually nothing about him; he is killed and he disappears. Like it or not, the story is really about Cain. What brought him to murder; what did his inner world look like? What did God mean to tell him just before he killed his brother? And did he really ever achieve forgiveness?

Who are the main characters in the story of the Forbidden Fruit in the Garden of Eden? Our first impulse is to point to Adam and Eve. But maybe the story is about someone else, too: The snake. He's not a very popular being -- he's certainly not a hero -- but perhaps the story is about him almost as much as it is about us. Let's spend some time trying to understand how he fits into the story.

### WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE SNAKE?

In email responses I received when these essays were first published on the web, a number of readers speculated about the identity of the snake. Some pegged him as "the Devil" -- a sort of fallen angel, a powerful "enemy of God" who seeks to thwart the Divine plan at every turn. As a Jew, I have to confess that I have difficulty with the notion of an independent source of evil in the universe that serves as a counterweight to God. Jewish thought tends to see Satan in different terms -- not as one who opposes the Divine plan, but as a sort of "Heavenly prosecutor" who is part and parcel of the Divine plan. Just as no earthly court is complete without a prosecutor, so too, the Heavenly Court is incomplete without its "prosecutor"; too -- a being who advocates forcefully for the application of Divine justice in all its rigor.

Was the snake, then, a manifestation of an angelic Satan -- whoever this Satan is? Maybe. But I'm a simple guy, and when I read the text, I see an animal here. One could argue that the angel is disguised in the form of an animal -- but let's at least give it a whirl and see if we can make the text understandable at its simplest level. Let's say the snake is an animal. What does he want? How are we to understand him?

Let's begin by gathering some information. From the text of the Torah, what do we know about this snake?

Well, for starters, he talks -- and this doesn't seem very snake-like at all. And to make matters worse, we're not even supposed to be surprised that he talks. When, for example, the Torah relates the story of Bilaam and his talking Donkey, we are clearly meant to be surprised by the animal's speech. But here in
Genesis, the snake's capacity for language just seems to be a given. The Torah tells us that one day a snake approached Eve and happened to strike up a conversation. Don't be surprised. That's just the way it is.

And it gets even more puzzling. The snake doesn't only talk. He walks, too. We know this because at the end of the story, the snake is cursed by God -- and the curse states that from this point forward, the snake must crawl on his belly and eat dust. The implication is clear: Before that point, the snake was not a creature that crawled. He walked.

Let's go still further. What did this walking, talking creature eat, before he was cursed? We don't know, but evidently, it wasn't "dust" -- that only became his diet afterwards. As the snake was originally created, it seems he was meant to dine on something more appealing.

And what about the intelligence level of this creature? The Torah is fairly explicit about that. The snake, according to the text, was pretty bright:

"And the snake was more cunning than any beast of the field..." (Genesis, 3:1).

So let's add it all up. The snake walks. The snake talks. He likes good food. He is intelligent.

What does he remind you of?

I don't know about you, but he reminds me of a human being.

Indeed, the snake so closely resembles a man that he forces us to ask: What, in the end, makes him a snake and not a man? This question hits close to home, because it's really a question about us and the nature of our humanity. Bottom line -- what makes us human and not a snake? If you walk, talk and are smart, are you then a person? Or can you still be a snake?

The snake, perhaps, forces us to ask: What is the essential dividing line between man and animal?

A CURIOUS TEMPTATION

But the mystery of the serpent does not end here. What else is strange about how the Torah portrays him in the story?

Well, let's talk about what this talking snake actually says. Remember, the Torah describes the snake as a smart operator, as being very "cunning". So pretend, for a moment, that you were the snake and you were very smart, and you wanted to con Eve into eating some fruit that she shouldn't be eating. How would you go about it?

Maybe you'd tell Eve how delicious the fruit looks. Maybe you'd craft a seductive lie about 'mysterious powers. Maybe, like the Evil Queen in Snow White, you'd just show up at her doorstep with a shiny apple. But let's see what the snake actually does. He approaches Eve, and, in the original Hebrew, says the following words: "af ki amar elokim lo tochlu mikol etz hagan". Most translations render these words:

'Did God really say that you may not eat from any of the trees of the garden?' (Genesis, 3:1).

But that's not the most precise translation of the Hebrew. A better, more literal translation would read:

"Even if God said do not eat from any of the trees of the garden..."

Well, it's no wonder that most translations take liberties with the Hebrew -- for the basic, literal translation of these words is quite strange, to say the least. First of all, the sentence has no ending. It just trails off into nothingness, as if the snake was interrupted before he could get to the punch-line. But even if we help the snake finish his thought, his words are hardly more understandable. For what he seems to be telling Eve is: "...even if God said don't eat from any trees of the garden, so what? Do it anyway!

One second. The best possible argument the snake could come up with was: even if God said don't eat it, so what? That doesn't seem very cunning, does it? Of all things, why choose to remind Eve that she's not supposed to eat the fruit? Why flippantly suggest that she disregard her Creator's command? Remember: To Eve, God is not just some abstract concept. God is real; God quite literally created her. What kind of argument is: "Even if God said no, so what?"

TO BE AS GOD

Read on a few more verses, and the snake's argument takes another interesting twist. Let's listen in as the snake suggests to Eve that he knows the real reason that God forbade her and Adam to eat the fruit:
"Really, God knows that on the day that you eat from it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis, 3:5).

Ponder this for a moment. Ask yourself: Is the snake lying, or telling the truth?

I don't know about you, but at first blush, it sure seemed to me that he was lying. I could hear my mind work: What kind of preposterous nonsense is it to suggest that God is jealously guarding the Tree of Knowledge because it holds the key to being godly? Is God really territorial -- worried that lowly humans, by virtue of eating some fruit, would magically become just like Him and encroach upon His heavenly realm? Please. He must be lying.

But there's no reason to philosophize about it. The text itself reveals to us whether the snake was lying or telling the truth. The verse I'm thinking of appears after Adam and Eve have eaten the forbidden fruit. Reflecting on their failure, God declares to Himself that mankind must now be banished entirely from the Garden. And here's the reason why:

God said, 'Man has now become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now he must be prevented from putting forth his hand and also taking from the Tree of Life. He [can] eat it and live forever!' (3:22).

As impossible as it seems, the snake was telling the truth after all. It's black on white. God clearly states that the fruit has somehow elevated Adam and Eve to become "like" Him, as they are now "knowers of Good and Evil". But how could it be? If the Tree of Knowledge really does make one "godly", wouldn't the Almighty want us to have it? It seems pretty blasphemous to suggest that God was afraid of competition from the creatures he created.

Finally, if this statement of God were already not perplexing enough, there's one last thing that's odd about it: Listen to how God defines what it means to be a Divine being:

Man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil...

Ask ten people on the street for a one-sentence definition of God. You'll probably hear that God is all-powerful. That he is all-knowing. The He is One. Or that He is the Creator.

Would anyone tell you that being God means "knowing Good and Evil"?

But that's precisely what the Almighty Himself says.

The snake -- this walking, talking representative of the animal world -- is right. God himself confirms his words. Being godly means knowing good and evil. Now it's up to us to find out what they both meant.

The Naked Truth: Serpents of Desire, Part 4

Discovering the key to the deeper layers of meaning beneath the narrative.

The entire story of Adam and Eve in the Garden is no more than 25 verses long. That's a pretty small amount of space in which to tell a story that changed the course of human history. The Encyclopedia Britannica would have devoted tens of pages to an event of such magnitude. We might wonder: How can the Torah communicate anything really profound with such a scarce amount of words?

One of the ways it can do so is by creating more than one "layer" of meaning in its narrative. Twenty-five verses may not sound like a lot, but it's plenty if the text is somehow "layered"; encoded so that it contains meaning far out of proportion to its size. Jewish tradition has long assumed that the Torah employs various techniques to help it "encode" meaning. One of those techniques is a device that's come to be known as "the leading word".

Every once in a while, when you are reading a Biblical narrative, you will find that the text seems to go out of its way to use a certain word, phrase or idea, consistently and repetitively throughout a story. When this happens, it often indicates that this repetitive element holds a key to the meaning of the narrative. The word or idea in question "leads" the reader, as it were, to a richer and deeper understanding of the text.

It just so happens that the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden contains such a repetitive word. If you take a quick break to scan the story yourself, you may well find it.

Well, ready or not, here it is:
The word is *arom* -- the Hebrew word for "nakedness".

**THE STRANGE PROMINENCE OF NAKEDNESS**

Nakedness appears everywhere throughout our story. It appears at the beginning, just before the snake tempts Adam and Eve: *and they were both naked, the man and his wife, and they were not ashamed*. It appears at the end, where God makes clothes for Adam and Eve so that they are no longer naked. And it appears right in the middle of the story, at its turning point, when man and his wife eat the forbidden fruit:

> And the eyes of both of them were open and they knew that they were naked.

Strange, isn't it? If someone asked you to imagine how eating a fruit that imparts "knowledge of good and evil" would affect mankind, what would you have said? Perhaps Adam and Eve would become instantly aware of a whole new world of moral dilemmas that lay before them. Right to Life vs. Right to Choice; or: Ten people are in a lifeboat and the whole boat sinks unless you throw someone off, what should you do? All sorts of such dilemmas. Their heads would be spinning with possibilities.

But no. None of that preoccupied Adam and Eve. When they ate from the Tree of Knowledge, the immediate effect was: *they knew they were naked*. It seems odd. Why does knowing "good and evil" affect our perception of nakedness? But there is nakedness again, front and center in the story.

Let's continue reading the text. Adam eats from the tree, and he immediately hides from God. Now let's ask, "why is he hiding"?

Before looking at the reason the text gives us, consider why it is that you would think Adam would be hiding. If the Bible had stopped its story just after Adam ate from the tree and hid from God, how would you explain Adam's act of seeking refuge? Imagine that some industrious CNN reporter managed to spot Adam hiding behind a bush and got an exclusive interview with him. He asks Adam a basic question: "I see you are crouching here behind this bush; you seem to be hiding from God. Can you explain to our viewers why?" If you were in Adam's shoes, what would you have said in reply?

You probably would have told him that you were embarrassed of what you did. Here you were, placed in Paradise, with the whole garden available to you for your enjoyment. One little thing God asked of you -- not to eat from a certain tree. And then you had to go and eat from it! You feel filled with shame; you've disappointed your Creator, and can't bear to face Him. If you are hiding, one would think that this would be the reason why.

But the text tells us something else. When God asked Adam why he was hiding, this was his reply:

> I heard your voice in the Garden and I hid because I was naked.

Somehow, Adam's consciousness of being naked was so profound, so disturbing to him -- that it trumped in his mind even his sense of shame at having disobeyed the one command of his Maker.

Why is nakedness so important to this story? Why is humanity's realization of it the one natural consequence of eating from a "Tree of Knowledge"? And why would this realization be so disturbing that it is the only reason man can think of to explain why he is hiding?

In order to answer this, we need to realize that, surprisingly, we haven't seen the end of nakedness in this story. It actually makes one more hidden appearance. Believe it or not, there's one more creature in the garden that's naked, and he may hold the key we have been seeking. Can you spot him?

**A PHANTOM NAKEDNESS**

If you had trouble identifying the "phantom nakedness" in our story, it may have been because you were reading the story in English. As it happens, most English translations, almost without exception, conceal the missing occurrence of "nakedness". They usually render the telltale verses in something like the following fashion:

> And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and they were not ashamed. Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field... (Genesis, 2:25-3:1).

As you read these words, you surely noticed that Adam and Eve were described as unclothed. But you probably didn't observe anyone else described the same way. Now trust me on this one -- you didn't see it because you were reading the words in English. Try reading the verses now, when we substitute the Hebrew word for "naked" -- *arom* -- in place of its English counterpart:

> And they were both *arom*, the man and his wife, and they were not ashamed. Now the serpent was more *arom* than any beast of the field... (Genesis, 2:25-3:1).

One second. The snake is "*arom*" too?
Absolutely. Immediately after the Torah describes Adam and Eve as being naked, the Torah uses the exact same Hebrew term to describe the snake. It just so happens that "arom" can mean not just "naked", but "cunning" too.

Well, what are we to make of this? In its simple meaning, the text is telling us about the crafty intentions of the snake -- that he is cunning; sly and deceitful. But it hardly seems a coincidence the Torah picked this particular word to describe the snake's devious intentions. The Torah seems to go out of its way to take this very key word in the story -- "arom" -- and attach it, backhandedly, to the "cunning" snake as well.

The mystery in all this deepens when we ask the question: Are the two meanings of "arom" -- "naked" and "cunning" -- related conceptually in any way? Are these apples and elephants, two entirely unrelated ideas, or is there some essential connection between them?

At first glance, the ideas "naked" and "cunning" don't seem to have much in common. But on reflection, they do seem related in a curious way. Mull the terms over -- "Naked and cunning, naked and cunning..." -- what comes to mind?

These words just happen to be opposites of one another.

When someone is naked, unclothed, there is no hiding. That person's "self" is laid bare for all to see. "What you see is what you get". On the other hand, when one is cunning -- he is sly and devious; he "cloaks" his true intentions and hides behind a facade. His true self is not seen.

Fascinating. The two meanings of arom are mirror images of each other.

And this just adds another dimension to our question: Why would the Torah take the same word it uses over and over again to mean "naked", and then, when describing the snake, twist its meaning to convey the very opposite idea -- "cunning"?

Could the Torah possibly be suggesting that -- yes, the snake was of course cunning -- but somehow, he was not just cunning -- but he was "naked" as well?

What could that mean?

**AN INNOCENT DECEPTION**

Biologically, of course, a snake really is naked: It is a reptile, a creature that, unlike most other members of the animal kingdom, lacks fur or hair to cover it. But if we think beyond biology, what would it mean for the snake to be not just "naked", but "naked"?

If "naked" is really the opposite of "cunning", then it seems to follow that the snake had both, opposite, qualities: He possessed both honesty and stealth. In other words, the snake really is deceptive -- but on another, perhaps deeper, level, he's very straightforward. It all depends at how you look at him. From one perspective, what he's saying doesn't really work for Adam and Eve, so his words are deceptive to them. But from another perspective -- what you see is what you get. He's just telling it like it is -- from a snake's point of view, of course.

As we shall see soon, this perspective seems to fit like a glove with a number of other clues scattered throughout our story. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. For we are not quite done yet exploring the snake's crafty disposition. There's one more important question we haven't asked yet. And that is:

What's in it for the snake?

We'll talk about that when we return next week.

What's In It for the Snake? Serpents of Desire, Part 5

Forbidden Fruit and the assassination attempt.

The Torah describes the snake as being sly or devious. But whenever we talk about someone acting in a sly or devious way, we always mean that they are sly and devious in pursuit of some goal. With the snake, that piece of the puzzle is missing. We know that he is sly, but that all that the text says about him. We have no clue what his motive for the crime might be. To put it succinctly: "What's in it for the snake?"

If the Torah doesn't bother telling us about the snake's motivation, we might conclude that it is because the missing information is so obvious it hardly bears mention.
I'd like to argue that the snake's motivation is indeed rather clear. It's just a matter of seeing his temptation in context. For in fact, the serpent doesn't come out of nowhere with his offer of fruit to Eve. There is a history to that offer. And discerning that history, I think, is a key to really understanding not just the snake, but the entire story of the Forbidden Fruit as a whole.

WHERE DOES OUR STORY BEGIN?

Most of us are used to thinking that the story of the Forbidden Fruit begins at the start of chapter 3, when the serpent shows up, engages Eve in conversation and tempts her to eat what she shouldn't be eating. But in truth, that's not the beginning of the story. The story actually begins way back in the middle of Genesis, chapter two, where the Tree of Knowledge is first introduced, and the command to avoid it is first given:

Out of the ground God caused to grow every tree pleasant to the sight and good for food; the Tree of Life in the middle of the garden, and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (2:9). And the Lord God commanded Adam, saying 'Of every tree of the garden you may eat freely. But of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil you shall not eat...'(2:16-17).

The reason it's easy to miss the fact that the story begins all the way back in chapter 2, is because after these two verses appear and introduce the trees, the text inexplicably digresses. In the verses that follow, God declares that "it is not good for man to be alone," and the Almighty then sets about trying to find a helpmate for him. The Almighty creates all the beasts of the field and parades them before Adam. Adam names all the creatures, but has no success finding a mate among them. Finally, the Lord puts Adam to sleep and takes a rib from him, out of which He builds Eve. And only then -- after the text tells us about the creation of both Eve and the animals -- does the story return to the Forbidden Fruit. Our familiar snake comes along, offers the fruit to Eve, and the rest is history.

All in all, it's a strange path for the text to take. Why does Adam's search for a mate interrupt the story of the Tree of Knowledge? At face value, it would seem more logical to get the creation of Eve and the animals out of the way first, and then begin talking about the Tree of Knowledge; that way, the narrator can bring each story to its conclusion without interruption. But for some reason, the Torah doesn't do this. It places the creation of the animals and Eve right in the middle of the Tree of Knowledge narrative. Why?

Let's begin by examining this "digression" a little more closely. The truth is, the story it tells is quite bizarre in its own right. Put yourself, for a moment, in the "shoes" of the Almighty. Imagine that you had created Adam and were then concerned that he not be all alone. You decide he needs a helpmate. What's the next thing you would do?

You'd probably decide to create Eve.

But that's not what happens. Instead, the Almighty creates all the beasts of the field and brings them before Adam to see if he might find an appropriate mate among them. One by one, Adam rejects them. In the process of that effort, Adam names each of the animals. Now, let's stop a minute to ask: Why, exactly, did God have to perform this little experiment? Are we to believe that God, the Great Matchmaker in the Sky, couldn't figure out that a zebra wouldn't be a good match for Adam? And after the zebra didn't work out as a wife, was it really necessary to try the hippopotamus and the flamingo also? The experiment with the animals seems almost like a charade. Why do we need to hear about it?

MAYBE THE DIGRESSION IS REALLY PART OF THE STORY

The combined weight of these questions suggests that perhaps we have been too hasty in classifying God's "attempt" to find a mate for Adam as a digression. Apparently, this thread is not an interruption of the Tree of Knowledge narrative at all. Instead, it would seem to be an integral piece of the larger picture. But how so?

Here's the outline of a theory. It's only an outline, so don't jump out of your seats and scream at me quite yet; we'll flesh this out later. But I'd like to suggest that the creation of the beasts of the field -- and Adam's rejection of them -- is actually crucial to the entire Forbidden Fruit narrative. In particular, I am going to argue that it is entirely impossible to understand the snake and his temptation without all this.

We had been puzzled earlier about the snake's motive. He is "cunning," but to what end? Well, perhaps the Torah doesn't talk about the motivation of the snake because it's clear from context. The earlier story about possible companions for Adam, I would suggest, provides the missing motive for the snake. In other words, perhaps it was Adam's rejection of the animals in favor of Eve that propelled the snake into action...

Remember how God had brought all the "beasts of the field" [Hebrew: chayat hasadeh] before Adam to see if he could find a mate among them? It turns out that this phrase, chayat hasadeh, is relatively rare. It only appears in one other context in the entire Book of Genesis -- in the description of the snake. When we first meet this primal serpent, the Torah describes the creature as "more cunning than all the beasts of the field [chayat hasadeh]."

Perhaps that, indeed, is what "drives" him -- this walking, talking serpent. The representative of the animal world closest, as it were, to man -- was seeking to succeed where all other animals had failed. All the chayat hasadeh had been unsuccessful in providing a companion for Adam. The snake, perhaps, was more cunning than all the chayat hasadeh: He was seeking to convince mankind that at least one "beast of the field" could be his companion after all.

A fascinating and perplexing ancient Midrashic text seems to suggest precisely this. The Sages of the Midrash were puzzled, as we were, with the missing motivation of the serpent. What drives him? Their answer is shocking: They say that the snake was on an assassination mission. The snake, knowing that the forbidden fruit harbored the promise of death, hoped that Eve would pass the fruit to Adam before partaking herself. Why? Because according to the Midrash, the snake wanted to assassinate Adam and marry Eve.
At face value, the Midrash seems preposterous. "Assassinate Adam and marry Eve? What would the children look like!", you protest. But Midrashim are not all meant to be taken literally. The rabbis often have a way of conveying deeper truths in mysterious, allegorical garb. Perhaps the Midrash is trying, in its own inimitable way, to lead us towards the very conclusion we have gingerly been approaching ourselves: That somehow, the snake's offer of forbidden fruit follows naturally from the immediately preceding story about Adam's choice to reject the animals in favor of Eve. Perhaps, on some deep level, the animal world -- to speak anthropomorphically -- was leveling a challenge to Adam. What makes you so special? What makes you so different than us that you stand alone and require an Eve as your mate? We can be your soul-mates too...

**IT IS NOT GOOD FOR MAN TO BE ALONE**

Let's explore this notion a bit further:

The Almighty had given Adam dominion over the animal world. As such, he had been set apart from that world in a very fundamental way. Mankind, king of nature, was atop Creation - but he was all alone in this powerful and dominating position...

*And God said: It is not good for man to be alone. I will make him a helpmate to join with him...*

To be alone is truly a great temptation. All alone, in charge of a vast world of nature, Adam looks at himself and sees himself as different, in some fundamental way, from every other creature around him. A king, yes -- but a king who is not fully kin with his subjects. The temptation of loneliness is to seek solace where it ought not be sought. For Adam, perhaps, this would mean seeking companionship among the animals. Pretending, if only he could, that He is one of them.

The animal world, for its part, might be seen as only too happy to oblige. If animals could think rational thoughts -- if we could anthropomorphize the perspective of the animal world -- what opinions might they have about our dominion over them? If animals could challenge our right to dominate, how would they do so?

The implicit challenge of the animal world is: "Are you really so different from us, that you stand above us? At your core, aren't you really one of us?"

And it's not just a question that animals might be the ones asking. It's a question we could all ask ourselves, every time we exert control over an animal -- every time we harness an ox to a plow or saddle up a horse to ride upon: "Who am I to do this?" "Am I really so different?"

In the eyes of the Midrash, perhaps, the snake gives a voice to these doubts. "Are you really so sure you need a human as a companion?", it whispers, "Why not choose a soul-mate from our world...?" We asked facetiously what the children of such a union might look like. But that's precisely the point. They would be "snake-men". The snake would have co-opted the world of man and made it part and parcel of the animal kingdom.

The Almighty gave Adam a chance to experience for himself how futile it would be to find real companionship in the animal world. It wasn't G-d, but Adam, who needed to be shown this. In allowing Adam to name -- or be intimate with -- the animals, G-d was seeking, perhaps, to "innoculate" mankind from the temptation he would soon face; to convince Adam through experience that he could never really be one with the animal world. Only after such a trial could he truly appreciate the unique compatibility of Eve -- "a bone from my bones; flesh from my flesh". And only after such a trial would he be ready for the challenge of the serpent -- "aren't you one of us...?"

All this, of course, brings us back to a question we entertained earlier -- a question we've not yet answered squarely, and perhaps now is the time to do so: "What, really, is the dividing line between man and animal?" The existence of the snake, we argued, presents this question to us in spades. The primal serpent walks. He talks. And he's clever. So in what sense is he really a snake and not a human? Why couldn't he be a fitting mate for mankind, after all?

The real answer to this question, I think, lies buried in the heart of our story.

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**Beauty and the Beast: Serpents of Desire, Part 6**

*Which Divine voice should you listen to? The voice of God that comes to you in words, *or* the voice of God that pulses inside you, that animates your very being?*

A key to the essential difference between snake and man, I would suggest, is revealed through a careful look at the snake's challenge to Eve.

We asked earlier about the strangeness of the snake's opening words to Eve: "Even if God said don't eat from any trees of the garden..." From there, the sentence trails off into nothingness, as if the snake was interrupted before it could finish the thought. But let's try and reconstruct the end of the sentence.
The snake seems to be saying: "Even if God said don't eat, so what? Do it anyway!" OK, stop the tape -- let's look at this: Where, exactly, is the temptation here?

I'd like to share with you an approach developed by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, a giant of Biblical exegesis who lived a little over a century ago. Hirsch suggests that the key to the snake's words lies in something as simple as emphasis: It depends on which part of the sentence gets italicized, as it were. Above, we read it, "Even if God said don't eat, so what?" Hirsch asks: What if we read it differently, with the emphasis placed on the word "said"?

The sentence sounds a whole lot different now:

"Even if God *said* don't eat, so what?"

Read this way, the snake isn't really challenging the authority of God per se. His argument is much more narrow; he's just saying is that God's spoken words are not the things you should pay attention to. Hirsch elaborates the snake's point this way:

*God may have said* to avoid the tree, but the question is: Do you want to eat from the tree? Do you desire it?

*And let's say you do desire the tree. Where do you think those desires came from? Who put them inside you?*

*Wasn't God the one who put them inside you?*

Certainly He did... He is your Maker...

All in all, the snake is pointing to a great and terrible contradiction: On the one hand, God's voice instructs you not to eat of the tree. But on the other hand, another voice of God -- His voice inside you; your passions, your desires -- beckons you to indeed eat of the tree.

So which voice should you listen to? The voice of God that comes to you in words -- or the voice of God that pulses inside you, that animates your very being? Which divine voice is more primary?

*I don't know about you, the snake says, but if I were in your shoes -- here's how I would see it:*

"Even if God *said* don't eat of the trees, so what?"

*It's not the voice that speaks to you in words that's primary. It's the voice inside you that's primary...*

**THE NAKED SNAKE**

In saying this, the snake is not necessarily being malicious or even devious. On the contrary, he can be seen as very innocent, very straightforward -- very naked. After all, he's just telling you what it's like to be a snake.

Consider this: How does God make His will known to a snake? How, for that matter, does God make His will known to any animal? The Almighty doesn't instruct animals intellectually. He doesn't speak to them in words. There is no Bible, no Torah, revealed atop a mountain, for snakes, birds and lizards. But just because a snake doesn't have a lawbook, doesn't mean there are no laws. To the contrary -- animals follow the Divine Will quite faithfully. The voice of God beats palpably inside of them. God speaks to animals through the passions, desires and instincts they find within themselves.

Every time a Grizzly Bear goes salmon hunting in an Alaskan river; every time worker bees chase the drones out of a hive -- every time an animal acts "naturally", obeying the voice of instinct or desire within itself -- the animal follows the will of its Creator.

So for the snake, the way out of the "contradiction" is quite clear: "Even if God *said* don't eat from the tree, so what?" The real voice of God is not to be found in words. The real voice of God doesn't speak to you from the outside, it beats insistently inside of you...

And that, in a nutshell, is the essential temptation of the serpent. It is a temptation that cuts to the core of our very humanity. Remember how we asked before: Why is it that the snake could never be a fitting companion for Adam? How is mankind fundamentally different from the snake -- or for that matter, from any member of the animal world? Well, let's try and tackle that now.

Does our uniqueness as humans lie in the fact that we can talk? Perhaps. But if we met a talking animal, would we grant it human rights? Lately, researchers have taught limited sign language to apes. Would these apes qualify as furry humans?

Maybe our advanced intelligence is what makes us human. But what if we met a really smart animal? As I understand it, the jury is still out on the intelligence of dolphins. If dolphins really are as bright as some claim, should they be entitled to the right to vote?
Well, then: If the key to our humanity doesn't lie in our capacity for speech, for walking on two legs, or for intelligent thinking -- all of which were shared by our friend, the primal serpent -- in what does our humanity lie?

I would argue that it lies in how you answer this one query: "How does God speak to you? Which is the primary voice of God?"

If God speaks to you primarily through passion and instinct -- if all you need to do is examine your desires to find out what God wants of you -- well, you are an animal. If God has expectations for you beyond acting on your instincts and passions; if God addresses Himself to your mind and asks you to rise above your desires or to channel them constructively -- well, then you are a human.

What the snake is really doing, then, is forcing Adam and Eve to confront what it means for them to be human beings and not beasts. In the end, the snake really is *arom* -- in all senses of the word. When he asks, "even if God *said* don't eat, so what?" -- he is being straightforward and honest; "naked", as it were. He was just telling it like it is: "Here's what it is like to be a snake". On the other hand, when we look at the snake's words from *our* point of view, from the perspective of Adam and Eve -- then, his argument looks cunning and deceptive, the *other* meaning of *arom*. What's right for the snake is not necessarily right for us. He may walk, he may talk, he may be smart -- but we are different than he; we hear a voice that is not relevant to him. When all is said and done, we are not snakes.

**BEAUTY AND THE BEAST**

The snake's challenge takes the form of a proposition to eat the Forbidden Fruit. If we look carefully, we'll find that this proposal follows naturally from the serpent's suggestion that the voice of desire is the primary way in which God speaks to us.

In the moments before deciding to take the fruit, Eve contemplates the choice before her. According to the text, here is what happened:

> And the woman saw that the tree was good to eat, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable as a means to wisdom... (Genesis, 3:6).

That, at least, is how most translations render the verses -- and indeed, it is how some commentators interpret them. But the Hebrew is a little more complicated. A more literal translation of the last phrase, *venechmad ha'etz lehaskil*, yields not that the tree was "desirable as a means to wisdom" but that:

> ... the tree was desirable to contemplate... (Genesis, 3:6).

"Desirable to contemplate." It's a strange phrase - and maybe that's why many translations shun it. What does it mean; what kinds of things are desirable to contemplate? For that matter, how does this last phrase fit with the first two? Are the three phrases -- "good to eat" / "delight to the eyes" / "desirable to contemplate" -- all related somehow?

I think they are. All three of these phrases describe how the tree appealed to Eve aesthetically -- at the level of beauty; or more precisely, at the level of desire. Each description portrays how the fruit was "desirable" -- and each description is more sophisticated and more subtle than the last.

To explain: A lollipop tastes "good to eat." Even a two-year-old can appreciate that. But it takes a ten year old to appreciate the beauty of a rose -- beauty that is "a delight to the eyes," not to the mouth. And what about things which are "desirable to contemplate"? This is beauty that appeals not to any of our physical senses, but to our mind. The poems of Emily Dickinson; the symphonies of Beethoven; an elegant debating performance -- all these are "desirable to contemplate". They appeal to the mind, yes -- but not because they are true, but because they are beautiful. Indeed, a poem may or may not express a truth, and a good debater can be impressive even if he's lying through his teeth. But that's irrelevant. The mind appreciates the beauty of such things -- and desires them accordingly.

The tree appealed to us at all levels of the aesthetic -- from the most obvious to the most subtle and refined. The fruit of the tree was dripping with desire.

"Even if God *said* don't eat, so what?"

*Desire and instinct are more trustworthy indicators of God's will than His words. Eat from the tree, bring desire ever deeper inside you -- and you shall truly be godly.*

Quoth the serpent, nevermore.

But what, you might ask, does all this have to do with "knowing good and evil"? Why would a battle over the proper role of desire in the human psyche be waged over a tree that contains, of all things, "knowledge of good and evil"?

Hang on. We'll explore that next.
Knowledge and the nature of good and evil.

The time has come to examine more carefully the centerpiece of our story, the "Tree of Knowledge". Doing so, however, is no easy task. The tree isn't around anymore -- and even if it were, we probably couldn't understand it by taking sap samples from its trunk, or by measuring the biochemical qualities of its fruit. But while the tree itself is gone, the Hebrew words that describe its characteristics are alive and well. And these, I think, may hold some of the clues we are looking for.

The forbidden tree is known in Hebrew as the "Etz HaDa'as Tov Vara". Let's ask ourselves what these Hebrew terms really mean. The conventional translation of the phrase is "knowledge of good and evil". Is there anything more here than meets the eye?

WHAT IS REAL KNOWLEDGE MADE OF?

Let's start with the first phrase, "da'at" -- conventionally translated as "knowledge". Interestingly, the meaning of this word is not limited to "knowledge" in the conventional sense of the word. Indeed, one of the first times the root is used in the Book of Genesis, it conveys an experience that, at first blush, few of us would call "knowledge" at all:

V'ha'adam yada es chavah ishto...
And the man knew his wife...

In the Bible, the word da'at doubles as a synonym for sexual intimacy. The Torah's use of this word for both "knowledge" and "sexual union" is probably significant. More than likely, there is a core understanding of "da'at" that gives rise to both these meanings. What would that core be about?

Let's try and approach it this way: When a man "knows" his wife, what is he really seeking? Cynics might reply that he's after nothing but pleasure. But beyond sheer, physical pleasure -- and even beyond procreation -- is there not something more, something deeper, that he seeks? Perhaps, on some level, he is indeed after "knowledge" -- knowledge of the mysterious, alluring feminine that is so different from him, but so much a "missing" part of him at the same time.

To be sure, it is not intellectual knowledge that he seeks. He is seeking raw, first-hand knowledge. He is seeking to experience the feminine in a direct, unfiltered way.

In the branch of philosophy known as epistemology, a long-standing debate has raged about what real "knowledge" is made of. The rationalists have argued that "head knowledge" reigns supreme. You know something is true when you can demonstrate it through logic or analysis. Others, though, have argued that real knowledge is gained by experience. It's all very nice to contemplate an idea in your head, they argue, but you only know it's real when it happens in the real world; when you demonstrate it, say, in a laboratory. If you see it, if you can feel it, if you experience it -- then you know it's real.

"Da'at" seems to denote this latter kind of knowledge - knowing something by experiencing it. A scientist who performs an experiment attains "da'at", even though he can't yet explain the rationale behind what he has experienced. A man attains "da'at" of a woman by joining with her and experiencing her, even though he can't express in words her mysterious essence. And mankind attains "da'at" of good and evil, perhaps, not by intellectualizing about morality and what it is made of - but by experiencing "good and evil" in a raw, direct way.

To summarize, then: In attaining "knowledge" of good and evil, we didn't get a better intellectual understanding of right and wrong. We got an experiential understanding of these things. We began to know right and wrong from the "inside" now.

But what, exactly, does that mean? It sounds so abstract. What does it mean to know "good and evil" in a raw, experiential kind of way? I know what it means to know ice cream experientially -- from the inside. I go to Baskin and Robbins, order some "Pralines 'N Cream" on a cone, and eat it -- then I've got my "da'at" of ice cream. But what does it mean to know "good and evil" in this way? How does one take "good and evil" inside of oneself?

A closer look at the words "good and evil" -- or in Hebrew, tov and ra -- may provide the keys we are looking for.

RIGHT AND WRONG FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Earlier, I alluded to Maimonides' view of our story. In his Guide to the Perplexed, Maimonides suggested that Adam and Eve were already aware of right and wrong, in some fashion, before eating from the tree. According to Maimonides, the tree did not give us moral awareness when we had none before. Rather, it transformed this awareness from one kind into another. Before eating from the tree, we would not have chosen to call virtuous moral choices "good" and vile choices "evil". We would have had a different way of thinking about such things; we would have used different words.
What were these "other words", this more "accurate" way of looking at things? Well, according to Maimonides, in the pre-tree world -- in the more pristine world -- virtuous choices would have been called "true", and reprehensible choices would have been labeled "false". In short, doing the right thing was called "truth"; and doing the wrong thing was called "falsehood".

What does Maimonides mean by this? At first glance, it seems bizarre. The word false would seem to describe "2+2 = 5" a lot better than it would describe, say, robbing a bank. What does it really mean to see morality as a set of choices between "truth and falsehood"? And how does this differ from saying that morality means choosing between "good and evil"?

I don't know for sure, and Maimonides doesn't elaborate all that much on what he means by this. But here's one way, I think, we might understand what he's getting at.

Let's think about it. How are "true" things different than "good" things?

When I say something is true, I'm describing objective reality. I'm telling you that something is out there; it's real. And it's real whether I like it or not. If we talk about morality as a matter of true and false, then, this might be shorthand for saying that making moral choices involves discerning something objective. It involves figuring out what the right thing to do is; what my Maker expects of me -- and then trying to align my behavior with that "truth".

How then, do we see virtue differently when we call it "good" rather than "true"? While the word "true" has a core meaning of "real", the word "good" is not quite as objective a term. For example, what else does "good" mean besides "that which is ethically correct"? Its other meaning is: "that which is pleasing". When I say something is good, what I am really telling you, in a subtle way, is that I approve of it; that it is desirable.

Perhaps, then, Maimonides means the following: The shift from a world of true and false to a world of good and evil was a shift between a world where my essential choice was an objective one, to a more subjective world -- a world in which my desire intrudes and becomes an inescapable part of the moral calculus...

As we suggested earlier, the "Tree of Knowledge" was deeply associated with desire -- it appealed to us at all conceivable aesthetic levels, from the most base (taste) to the most profound (mind). Perhaps the mysterious tree of knowledge was really a tree of desire. And perhaps the most fundamental ramification of our choice to eat from it was simply this: The role that desire plays in our lives would become forever changed.

To explain: In the pre-tree world, desire was more easily controlled. It was a natural part of man -- but a part that was in equilibrium with the rest of us. It was less likely to blind-side us. In the post-tree world, that can no longer be taken for granted. Desire brandishes a higher profile in man's psyche. It remains ever present, in the background, always a force to be reckoned with. Desire becomes a lens through which I view things. I no longer see a clear world of "true" and "false"; I now see something that is ever so slightly different. I see "good" and "evil".

**A WORLD OF BROCCOLI AND PIZZA**

If this still seems a little abstract, let's go back to some more commonplace ways in which we use these words, "true and false", as well as "good and evil". I think if we listen carefully to these words, we'll see some echoes of Maimonides' understanding of things:

When we shoot an arrow that hits its mark, we sometimes speak of the arrow having flown "true" to its target. Conversely, the Hebrew word *chet*, which means "sin", also doubles for "having shot at a target and missed" (see Judges, 20:16). In effect, when I see moral decisions as choices between truth and falsehood, it means that I am trying to "hit a target" when I make these decisions. I am trying to discern my Creator's expectations for me and I am trying to act accordingly. To sin is not primarily about hell-fire and guilt. If it is about that, it's only secondary. What it's about primarily is "missing the mark" -- failing to align myself with the reality called the will of my Creator.

And let's talk about the other side of the coin. When a kid pushes away a plate of broccoli because he says it's "bad" and prefers the pizza because it's "good" -- he is not dispassionately telling you about the quality and nutritional benefits of the food. He's telling you what he likes and what he doesn't like. In a curious kind of way, he *is actually telling you more about himself than he is about the food.*

Similarly, when the Torah speaks of "knowing good and evil", perhaps this is shorthand for a new way of looking at moral choices. Yes, I am still trying to figure out what God wants of me -- at least overtly. But there's another factor that can potentially cloud my vision: It's not only about what G-d wants anymore; it's also about what I want. Inside of every moral decision is a little bit of pizza and broccoli. My own desires are now an inescapable part of the picture; I am seeing right and wrong "from the inside" now. I can rise above these desires, but doing so is not as easy as it seems.

In the brave new world of good and evil, the picture I have of what is right and worthwhile is not necessarily the way things really are. That which is merely "good" -- desirable to me -- can easily masquerade very righteously as the "true". When I am looking at life through the filter of my own subjectivity, I may think that "X" is what G-d wants -- *but perhaps it's really just what I want?*

**ARE ALL MORAL DILEMMAS CREATED EQUAL?**

To really get a handle on these ideas, I'd like to take them out of the realm of theory and apply them to "real life". Let's try talking about "truth and falsehood" and "good and evil" in the context of some moral dilemmas that you and I might face during the course of our lives.
Try a little thought experiment, if you would. Below, you'll find a list of several hypothetical moral dilemmas. See whether you feel that these dilemmas might divide naturally into two different groups. Take a blank piece of paper, perhaps, put a line down the middle and mark one side of the line "Column A" and the other side "Column B". How, if at all, would you divide the list?

Here are the examples:

"Is it OK to take the dying man off the respirator?"

"My elderly mother needs help organizing her house before she moves -- but my kid needs me to help him prepare for finals. Who do I spend the evening with?"

"Should Billy lie to the teacher to protect his friend Bobby, when the teacher asks him whether Bobby was cheating on his test?"

It's a dark and rainy night in Manhattan. You throw your trusty Chevy Suburban into reverse and begin to back out of your parking spot, when you hear a sickening thud. You get out of the car to behold, right behind you, a shiny black Lexus convertible -- with a badly dented front end. You look around. The street is entirely dark, not a soul to be seen. Do you leave a note or not?

My personal view is that the dilemmas do divide naturally into two groups. Three of these dilemmas, I think, are "real". One of them, though, is fundamentally illusory. Three of the dilemmas exist no matter whether you live in a world of "true and false" or a world of "good and evil". The other exists only in the mixed up world of "good and evil". In the world of "true and false", it evaporates like smoke.

See what you think.

A Dark and Rainy Night in Manhattan: Serpents of Desire, Part 8

The boxer named Desire.

Last week, we talked about three moral dilemmas -- one of which, I argued, was a phantom.

"Is it okay to take the dying man off the respirator?"

"My elderly mother needs help organizing her house before she moves -- but my kid needs me to help him prepare for finals. Who do I spend the evening with?"

"Should Billy lie to the teacher to protect his friend Bobby, when the teacher asks him whether Bobby was cheating on his test?"

It's a dark and rainy night in Manhattan. You throw your trusty Chevy Suburban into reverse and begin to back out of your parking spot, when you hear a sickening thud. You get out of the car to behold, right behind you, a shiny black Lexus convertible -- with a badly dented front end. You look around. The street is entirely dark, not a soul to be seen. Do you leave a note or not?

Well, did you find the impostor?

If you identified the illusory dilemma as the last one -- the dark and rainy night in Manhattan -- then you and I are on the same page. If you didn't -- well, we can still be friends. But in any case, here's my thinking:

The first three dilemmas share a certain, basic quality. They are choices between competing ideals. Each ideal is worthy or noble in its own right, and the dilemma arises only because the two ideals are forced to compete with one another.

For example, take our respirator case: Everybody agrees that prolonging a life is a noble thing, and everyone agrees that improving the quality of a life is also noble -- but what happens when you are forced to choose between the two? And consider Bobby and Billy. Honesty and loyalty are both things worth fighting for. But when each value leads you in a different direction, which one wins out? And so it is with mom and the kids: I have obligations towards both these relatives; how do I weigh my competing obligations?

All these choices are genuine. There are two "boxers in the ring", as it were -- two competing values -- and the question is: Which boxer wins? Which value is dominant? How does my Creator expect me to act?
But let's turn now to the last case: It's that dark and rainy night in Manhattan, and am I pondering whether I am going to leave that note. Let's try and identify the competing "ideals" here. Well, first we have honesty. Honesty says leave the note. Okay, now where's the counter-argument? Think carefully...

There is none.

One second. If there's no second ideal, you might ask, then how come it's such a struggle to figure out what to do? It should be a no-brainer. There's only one "boxer". Shouldn't he win by forfeit?

The answer is: There is indeed another boxer here. But it's not an ideal. It's a boxer named desire.

**A BOXER NAMED DESIRE**

In this last dilemma, the battle is being waged between an ideal -- honesty -- and *what you would rather do*. The two boxers are simply named: Honesty vs. *the fact that you don't want to leave the note*.

That, of course, is not how your brain presents things to you, though. Let's listen in on our internal dialogue as you inspect the mangled front end of the Lexus and wrestle with your decision:

"You know, I really *should* leave that note... But ... one second -- before I do that, do I really know for sure that I'm the one who made that dent? I mean, sure I heard a noise when I backed up, but maybe I just ran over a soda can in the gutter or something. And I just *tapped* that Lexus anyway; could I really have made such a big dent?

Boy, I sure would be a sucker if that car was already dented and I left a note. Anyway, what business did he have parking his toy so near my truck? What a fool I'd be to leave *him* a note. Look, it's not like he'll be out any money or anything. Heck, his insurance company will pay. That's what *uninsured motorist insurance is for*, isn't it?..."

By the time you're done, you've convinced yourself that it would be positively *virtuous* to just walk away. It's Robin Hood, vs. the Big Insurance corporations; it's the little guy vs. the rich and arrogant; it's you vs. your own naivete -- why, you wouldn't be so naive as to think he *would* leave you a note if he was the one who hit you?

But it's all a sham. All those "boxers" are phantoms. The real name of the second boxer is simply desire.

Welcome to the world of "good and evil".

**THE MIND-GAMES OF DESIRE**

A fascinating Midrash echoes this idea. The last time I quoted a Midrash in this space, I got a lot of incredulous comments from readers -- so a quick word to the wise: The ancient rabbinic commentary known as Midrash generally speaks in the language of allegory, and it often intentionally cloaks its message in outlandish garb. [Traditional commentators from Luzzatto to Maharal have rarely taken the statements of the Midrash literally.] The trick is to read between the lines and to piece together what the sages are driving at. So take a deep breath, and try this one on for size:

The sages of the Midrash state that after a person dies, the Heavenly court allows him to view his Evil Inclination -- his "yetzer hara," as it were. The sages go on to say that if the person was righteous in his lifetime, his Evil Inclination appears to him as a mountain, and if he was wicked, it appears to him as a lowly hill. In either case, the person is astonished: The first person is amazed that he managed to surmount the mountain, while the latter is astonished that such a measly hill deterred him.

What do the sages mean to say here? At first blush, their teaching is counterintuitive. If anything, one would have expected the reverse: Wasn't the wicked person tormented by the "mountain," by roiling desires he found impossible to subdue? And wasn't the righteous person the one with the tamer sense of personal desire, the mere "hill"?

A friend once suggested to me an interesting explanation: Perhaps the difference between a righteous person and a wicked one is not so much that one has a greater or more intense *yetzer hara* than the other; it's that by and large, the wicked person succumbed to that *yetzer hara* whereas the righteous person didn't. And that changes what each sees when he looks backward: The righteous person sees desire that has not yet been sated, whereas the wicked person sees what desire looks like after one has given into it.

When desire is yet to be satiated, it looks like a mountain. Just before you eat the chocolate macadamia fudge tort, you can't imagine anything more delicious. But through the rear view mirror, desire gives a different appearance. Once you've finished off the last crumbs, the mountain is gone, and you see reality for what it really is: The tort tasted good for all of thirty seconds, and now you've got two hours ahead of you in the gym to work it off.

Such are the pitfalls of subjectivity. In the post-tree world of "good and evil", a dilemma is born on the rainy streets of Manhattan. Desire, for all its size and power, dwells unseen within ourselves, hiding easily behind "phantom boxers". In this world of subjectivity, evil can get dressed up in pretty clothes -- and when it does, it's hard to know the difference between that which is truly virtuous and compelling, and that which is merely seductive.
THE BEGINNINGS OF DESIRE

The snake's argument, perhaps, stands as a living example of this kind of seductiveness masquerading as virtue. Like that rainy night in Manhattan, the choice whether to eat from the tree or not may have seemed to Adam and Eve like a legitimate dilemma:

"Which 'voice' of God do I listen to? The desire inside me, or the voice that commands me with words?"

It seems like a reasonable enough question. And there were good reasons, perhaps, to advocate partaking from this tree of desire. There were good reasons to think it would be right and good and laudable to bring desire into our lives more powerfully than before. After all, the snake is not altogether wrong about instinct and desire constituting the "voice of God". Passion does come from God, and experiencing it seems to be an essential part of what makes us human. What would it be like to wake up in the morning with no sense of ambition, or to look at a spectacular sunset without a sense of yearning? What if great art seemed humdrum; if romance was wooden and unappealing; if poetry failed to stir our souls? We can well ask if life would still be worth living. To some extent, passion is the very stuff of life.

It's all very reasonable, isn't it? But like that rainy night in Manhattan, there's a sub-text to this dilemma. The intellectual arguments mask another agenda. Even as Adam and Eve stood in the world of true and false, the world of "good and evil" beckoned to us, and desire began to assert its subtle influence.

The astute reader will notice that when Eve paraphrases to the serpent God's command to avoid the Tree, she changes a few nuances in the command. At face value, the changes seem fairly innocuous. For example, Eve identifies the tree she and Adam must avoid as being in the "center of the Garden". But if you go back to chapter two, you'll see that this wasn't where the forbidden tree was really located....

If you look at the verses carefully, and you'll find that this is not the only change she makes -- there are actually a whole bunch of other ones as well. Which brings me to your homework assignment: Get out those number two pencils and see if you can make a list of these discrepancies over the coming days. "In what ways did Eve mis-communicate God's restriction?" Now, when you've got your list together, ask yourself: Why did Eve change these details?

Well, it's possible, of course, that Eve was the unfortunate victim of a communications failure. She wasn't created yet when the original command to avoid the tree was given, and maybe Adam repeated it inaccurately to her. Maybe. But it's also possible that something else was afoot.

Look carefully and see if you think there is any pattern to the various discrepancies between the original command and Eve's paraphrase of it.

I, for one, think such a pattern exists. Crack open your Bible, and see if you agree with me.

Desire can confound our perception of the way things really are. A biblical case study.

I asked you last week to compare Eve's paraphrase of God's command to the original command itself. Clearly, the two are different. Some of the differences amount to outright inaccuracies; others, to mere changes in emphasis. But, just to drive home the point -- the question I'm interested in is: Taken as a whole, do these changes suggest a pattern of some sort -- or are they just random misquotations?

Let's reproduce the verses in question so it will be easier to compare them. Here they are:

God's Original Command:
And God caused to grow from the ground all sorts of trees that were good to look at and good to eat from, and the Tree of Life in the middle of the garden, and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (2:10). ... And the Lord God commanded Adam saying: From all the trees you may eat, yes eat. But from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, do not eat from it, for on the day you eat from it you will surely die (2:16-17).

Eve's Paraphrase of that Command:
And the woman said to the serpent: From the fruit of the trees of the garden we can eat. But from the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden God said not to eat from it and not to touch it lest we die (3:3-4).

Okay, let's catalogue the differences. What did you come up with?

Here's my list:
what it looks like, the text seems to be saying, to struggle with the phantom boxer, the boxer named desire: In subtle ways, things can start to look either

We look at the reality in front of us, and we play a game that involves exaggerating certain aspects of it and minimizing others. The game proceeds, more or less, along the following lines:

We might begin by exaggerating the extent of the restriction placed upon us. [e.g. "even touching the tree is forbidden"]. It's easier to rationalize a wrong if we exaggerate how difficult it is to abide by the rules. How could my parent expect me not to even get near the cookie jar? It's one thing not to eat, but how am I supposed to avoid the whole east wing of the kitchen?

Conversely, I might minimize the significance of what I can have. In reality, I may "eat, yes, eat" from "all" the trees in the garden, save one. There are thousands of trees that I am encouraged, maybe even commanded, to partake from. But the mind-games of desire shift the emphasis: Sure, we can eat from "trees", but we can't even touch the one in the middle...

What of the consequences of transgressing? That's something I tend to trivialize also. We won't die right away will we? No. Even God only meant that today we would become mortal -- but death itself won't happen for years and years. Why, of course I should stay away from the tree -- but only in case I might eventually die...

Finally, I might exaggerate the significance of the thing I can't have: It becomes my focus, the center around which my world starts to revolve. Remember: Which tree is in the "center" of the garden? For any given observer, the center of a forest might just be the tree that he's looking at. For God, the center of the garden, what occupies His "focus", is the Tree of Life -- a tree that, interestingly, was not originally placed "off-limits". For Eve, though, the tree I can't eat from becomes the center. Desire focuses on the forbidden and magnifies it -- not because objectively the thing is important, but simply because I can't have it.

In portraying Eve's conversation with the serpent the way it does, the Torah seems to be constructing for us a case study in the dynamics of desire. Here is what it looks like, the text seems to be saying, to struggle with the phantom boxer, the boxer named desire: In subtle ways, things can start to look either
bigger or smaller than they really are. The implied warning is clear: Don't be too quick to embrace your impeccably constructed arguments about why you really should eat that fruit. First, ask yourself: Am I seeing things the way they really are, or just the way I want to see them? Even if I'm not exactly lying to myself about the facts, am I playing with how I emphasize them? Am I exaggerating the importance of some things, minimizing the significance of others?

THE REMAINING PUZZLE PIECES

If desire played itself out so powerfully in the very first decision of Adam and Eve -- whether or not to partake of the forbidden fruit -- how did the consequences of that choice make themselves felt? How did eating from the tree -- how, perhaps, did even the struggle of whether to eat from it -- change Adam and Eve? How has it changed us?

To grapple with this, we need to look carefully at the rest of our story -- namely, what transpires once Adam and Eve eat the fruit. Let's keep it simple, for now: What are those events? Let's catalogue them:

- Adam and Eve realize that they are naked and hide from God.
- God asks Adam where he is.
- Adam answers that he is hiding because he is afraid that he is naked.
- After dismissing Adam and Eve's explanations for contravening God's command (she told me to do it; the snake told me to do it), the Almighty imposes various punishments on them, including death, exile, difficulty farming, and pain in childbirth.

Earlier, we pointed out some strange aspects of these events. But in reality, the list of troubles is even larger and more comprehensive than we let on before. Each of and every one of these "post-eating-from-tree" happenings, is, I think, perplexing in its own way. Let's go through them one by one and see how:

- **Adam and Eve realize they are naked and hide from God.** Earlier in the series, we mentioned that the emphasis on nakedness here seems strange: Why, of all things, is this the cardinal consequence of eating from a tree bearing "knowledge of good and evil". After attaining this knowledge, Adam and Eve do not become aware of a whole new realm of moral dilemmas. Instead, they realize they are naked. Why?

- **God asks Adam where he is.** One second; you mean to tell me the Almighty couldn't find him? Why is God asking a question to which He already knows the answer?

- **Adam answers that he is hiding for he is afraid because he is naked.**

  Read that line again and see if that's the way you would put it if you were Adam. First of all, as we mentioned earlier, it is strange that Adam singles out his nakedness as the reason he is hiding. If you and I were in Adam's shoes, we probably would have said we were hiding out of shame that we disobeyed God. But for some reason, in Adam's mind, this sense of shame is trumped by something even more overwhelming: His awareness of his own nakedness. Again, we're back to the naked theme: Why was this so important to him?

  But the question is really a little deeper than this. Again, put yourself in Adam's shoes. If you were going to hide because you were naked, what emotion would you pinpoint as the reason you want to hide? I don't know about you, but I would pick either shame or embarrassment. How do we feel when we are naked in public? Embarrassed, I would think. But strangely, Adam talks about something else. He says he is afraid because he is naked. Why, in Adam's mind, does his nakedness inspire not embarrassment, but fear?

- **The Almighty imposes various punishments on Adam and Eve.** Okay, let's think about these punishments. We might expect, I think, of an omniscient and perfectly just God, that the punishments He would choose to impose would fit, in some sense, the crime. There should be some logical correspondence, some "tit-for-tat", as it were, between what the people did wrong and the consequences they are made to bear. But what connection is there between punishment and crime in our story? At face value, it seems almost as if the Almighty reached into His celestial grab-bag of consequences and randomly doled out lightning-bolts: "Let's see, Adam? You're the one who works the fields around here -- OK, no more easy street for you. Eve? Right. You're the one who bears children -- let's make that a little tougher. And the snake? He'll crawl on his belly and eat dust, and there will be eternal hatred between his progeny and those of Eve. While we're at it, death to everybody; nobody gets to live forever anymore. And one last thing: Exile. Everybody out of the pool."

At last long, I think we're in a position to answer these difficulties. Having seen the connection of this story to that of Adam naming and rejecting the animals; having defined our choice to partake of the forbidden fruit as a trial that asked us to understand why really an animal could never be our soul-mate; having seen the subjectivity that lurks both in "da'at", the internal, experiential kind of knowledge, and in "tov and ra", the Brave New World of looking at right and wrong; having seen all this -- we are finally in a position, I think, to understand more deeply the aftershocks of eating from the Tree: God's strange question "Where are You"; Adam's intense focus upon, and fear of, nakedness; and the Almighty's seemingly random imposition of punishments.

Over the next two weeks, I'll try to pull all these threads together, as we begin to close the curtain on our look at Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. In the meantime, if you'd like to pause and reflect a bit before reading further, you might ask yourself: Are those punishments really as random as they seem? And -- given the nature of the Tree as we've begun to see it -- why might fear of nakedness be exactly the response one might expect from a being who suddenly wakes to find himself inhabiting a radically new world of "good and evil"?
A few years ago, I flipped on the radio while driving in New York City. A disc jockey on one of the music stations was offering to help love-stricken callers sort out their romantic troubles. Listening for a few minutes, I encountered an exchange between the DJ and an earnest young, religious fellow who was explaining why he had chosen to remain abstinent until he was married. The DJ debated with him -- and to my surprise, advanced a religious argument -- very pious sounding, actually -- against the caller. "Tell me," the host began, "are you a normal fellow? Do you have any desires?"

Silence at the other end of the line.

After a suitable pause, the host continued: "Look, why do you think the Lord placed these desires in you if He didn't want you to act upon them?"

The poor fellow hadn't expected to be attacked on religious grounds -- and he didn't have much of an answer. As I drove away, my heart went out to the mismatched caller -- and it struck me that the primal snake, after all these years, is still alive and well. His argument, despite the passage of time, seems as current now as it ever did.

"Even if God said don't eat from the tree... so what?"

"God's commands, whatever they may be, are not primary. The real voice of the Divine whispers to you from the inside, through desire and passion that He has instilled in your very being. If your desires were placed inside you by your Creator, then don't you honor Him by doing their bidding?"

Throughout history, opponents of religion have advanced this rather basic argument in a number of forms and guises. In the last hundred or two odd years, one of the more powerful of these attackers was Friedrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher who, fittingly enough, entitled a collection of his essays "Beyond Good and Evil". In those writings and in others, Nietzsche railed against organized Western religion. He decried the tendency of religion to shun worldly pleasures and delights; to avoid them as if they were something to be afraid of. Passion, he declared, was the stuff of life itself. If one avoids passion, if one fails to engage it, he has failed the most basic test of humanity. He has failed to live.

What, really, is the answer to the snake -- or, for that matter, the answer to any modern purveyor of his argument? It's all very nice to say that passion is for animals and God's commands are for humans; that animals obey the voice of God inside them and that we obey the voice of God that comes to us through God's commands - but, as humans, are we really ready to consign passion to the dust heap? Desire, when you really think about it, has much to commend it. Passion fires our aesthetic sense: It makes us yearn for beauty; reach out for the spectacular sunset; thrill to the sounds of Yo-Yo Ma's cello. To at least some extent, Nietzsche was right: Our appreciation of these things, at least in part, is what makes us human. The minute I am devoid of desire, the minute I have no ambition left -- I have no reason to wake up in the morning. I'm as good as dead.

So where, exactly, was the snake wrong?

To really respond to the snake effectively, we need to re-calibrate our arguments a bit. We need to take one last, long look at desire, and see if we really want to completely dismiss its charms. After all, one could argue that God Himself is nothing if not passionate: He is a Being whose Will is so powerful that it spontaneously manifests itself as reality. God desires a universe and out of nothing, it explodes into being. What could be wrong, the snake asks, with a little more passion?

TORAH AND THE SPICE OF LIFE

A good 18 centuries ago, the Sages of the Talmud anticipated this line of reasoning, and they put forward a pithy but perplexing aphorism that tries, I think, to respond to it. The aphorism was written in Hebrew; here's how it's usually translated:

The Holy One, Blessed Be He, said to Israel: My son, I have created the Evil Inclination; and I have created the Torah, its antidote. If you involve yourself in the Torah, you will not be delivered into its hands... (Tractate Kiddushin, 30b).

At first glance, the Sages seem to be implying that the Evil Inclination is a problem, a sickness, and the Torah is its solution -- the way to get rid of the sickness. But, as is sometimes the case, a lot has been lost in the translation. In the original Hebrew, the Talmud says that the Almighty created the Torah as "tavlin" for the Evil Inclination. Most translations render that word "tavlin" as "antidote" or "salve" ("if you take the antidote... you will not be delivered into its hands..."), which seems to fit with the context -- but unfortunately, that's not really what tavlin means. If you go to Israel today and walk into a shop and ask for tavlin, they'll won't direct you to the medicine counter. Instead, they'll walk you over to the spice rack, and give you a choice of parsley, sage, rosemary or thyme. In Hebrew, tavlin means spice.
Well, that certainly throws things for a twist. If *tavlin* translates as "spice," what does it mean to say that the Torah is "spice" for the Evil Inclination?

What kinds of things do you put spice on?

You put spice on meat; you put spice on food.

Interesting. The Evil Inclination is "meat." What a profoundly different way of looking at things! If you were stuck on a desert island and could be supplied for a year with your choice of either meat or spice, which would your rather have? I'd venture that most of us would opt for the meat. Spice is great, but you can't live on spice. Meat is fuel; meat provides you with the energy to live.

At first blush, it seems surprising, even blasphemous, to see things this way: How dare you say that the Evil Inclination is more "essential" somehow than Torah! But hold your horses and think a bit about what the Sages are saying here. For it's not just the word "*tavlin*" in this aphorism that defies easy translation; the term "Evil Inclination" -- that thing for which the Torah is meant as *tavlin* -- is just as slippery a concept to get a handle on.

What, exactly, is this thing named "the Evil Inclination"? Is it the Dark Side of the Force? Is it some horned devil, complete with pitchfork and bright red suit? Is it some scorned angel with a little too much time on his hands who perches above our left shoulder and whispers bad advice in our ear? When we think about the Evil Inclination, we often envision something darkly metaphysical or faintly childish. But in "real life," what is this thing?

If we exchange the language of the rabbis for modern, psychological language, we might say that the Evil Inclination is nothing more or less than our passions, our drives, our desires. In fact, we might go a bit farther. In Hebrew, the term for "Evil Inclination" is *yetzer hara*. The root of the word *yetzer* is *y'tz'r* -- which, fascinatingly, means: "to create". If we translate *yetzer hara* quite literally, it would seem to connote -- get ready for this: The drive to create, [in] evil [form]. Or, perhaps, more succinctly: *Yetzer Hara* = "creativity gone awry"...

Our passions fuel us; they are engines that makes us go. Our drive to create, in particular, is one of the deepest and most fundamental of these passions. It, indeed, has many outlets: Sexuality; artistic endeavor; the yearning to be an inventor; ambition of almost any sort -- you name it; they are all expressions of creativity at some level. The Talmud, centuries before Freud and Nietzsche, insisted that such forces our essential to our humanity. Without energy, without "meat", you are dead.

But, the Talmud adds, the meat can still use some spice. Let's think about this carefully. What, exactly, does spice do for meat?

*It gives direction to it: it makes it taste one way rather than another.* Without any spice; meat is bland; with the proper spices, it's the dish of kings.

Maybe this explains the rabbis' insistence that Torah is the *tavlin*, the spice, for the Evil Inclination. The Torah gives direction to our most basic, most powerful, drives. Sexuality, ambition; these things are the highly flammable fuel that combusts inside us and makes us go. It is tempting for religion to look at such raw, daunting forces and to frown upon them; to try and suppress them. The Talmud is saying, though, that the answer to the fearsome power of passion is not to go and take the engines out of our cars; to renounce "meat" and starve. No, the Torah is designed not to extinguish passion but to complement it; to provide spice -- *direction* -- for it; to make desire *taste like something*. The Torah's commands seek to direct passion towards productive ends; towards worthwhile, even holy, endeavors. Feel your passion, your sexuality, your ambition, the Torah says; don't destroy it. But direct it this way, rather than that way. Steer it; don't let it steer you.

**THE ADVENT OF IMBALANCE**

There was a time, I would submit, when this task of steering was not as difficult a job as it now seems to us. In the pre-tree world, when passion and intellect were more naturally in balance, "moral clarity" was easier to come by. We could make decisions with unfiltered vision, without undue fear that our desires distorted the moral landscape; without worrying quite so much that the way we perceived the Will of our Creator was subtly corrupted by our own passions; by our own will to create.

That world changed -- *we changed* -- when we ate of the Tree of Knowledge. After partaking from this wellspring of desire, I would suggest, Adam and Eve sensed that the engine that burned inside them was more powerful than it had been before. Yes, their heightened desire made them greater beings, more like God Himself, the Ultimate Creator:

...you shall be as gods, knowing good and evil... (Genesis 3:5)...

But there was a hitch: Humanity traded in its engine for a more powerful one -- but it was still left with the same steering wheel as it had before. The delicate balance between passion and intellect was altered. In the post-tree world, Adam and Eve -- all of us, really -- were left to struggle with the dilemma: How does one direct a powerful, massive engine, with a small, easily overmatched intellect?

**A NEWFOUND FEAR**

Now let's re-read our story one last time, focusing on what happens immediately after Adam and Eve eat from the Tree.
In the immediate aftermath of eating from the Tree of Knowledge, Adam hears "the voice of God strolling in the Garden", and he hides, aware that he is naked. It is interesting that it is the hearing God's voice -- not anything in particular that God says, but just the awareness of His voice -- that prompts Adam's anxiety. Having just hearkened to the snake's gambit, having accepted, if only because he wanted to, the idea that God really speaks to me through my instinct, through the voice inside me -- at that moment, hearing the voice of God coming from the outside was especially jarring. It was a stark reminder that God does, indeed, speak to man with words; that His expectations go beyond our simply yielding to the engine inside us, letting it take us where it will.

Adam's anxiety takes the form of discomfort over his nakedness. Interestingly, the emotion Adam talks about here is not embarrassment -- what we might have expected from someone who just realized he is naked -- but fear:

_I was afraid because I was naked and I hid_ (ibid. 3:10).

Fear is a world away from embarrassment. I become embarrassed when a peer teases me, when I make a gaffe in public; I am afraid, on the other hand, of something I sense is bigger than me, of something beyond my control, of something that can crush me. Before he ate from the tree, Adam was well aware that he was naked; he just wasn't afraid of it. Sexuality, in the old world, had been just a natural part of life -- why bother with clothes? Now, though, things felt different. Sexuality -- the biological manifestation of our drive to create -- was stronger, more overwhelming, now. Nakedness -- direct, unfiltered confrontation with our own sexuality -- is now a source of fear.

These newly powerful passions, this drive to create -- it may be godly; it may be intoxicating; but it can also crush me, can't it? How does one steer an engine as fearsome as this?

**THE PRICE OF POWER**

After Adam and Eve eat from the tree, God imposes upon them what seems to be a grab-bag of punishments: Death, pain in childbirth, difficulty farming; the snake crawls on his belly and eats dust. But are these "punishments" really as random as they seem?

Let's start with the snake. Adam and Eve were beguiled by a walking, talking serpent into losing sight of the essential differences between themselves and the animal world. Now, in the aftermath of that failure, God removed that particular source of confusion: No longer would the animal world seem quite so nearly human. The snake now crawls on its belly and loses its legs -- and, presumably, its ability to speak as well. Moreover, there is the promise of hatred between the children of Eve and the descendants of the snake. Humankind, having once mistaken itself for snakes, will be less likely to do so in the future.

As for the punishments that affect Adam and Eve, are they really punishments at all -- or perhaps just consequences? Let's go back to the "engine and steering wheel" analogy. Imagine you had a car built by a supremely competent manufacturer. It works in complete harmony with everything else built by the same manufacturer -- and it works in complete harmony with itself. Now let's ask some questions:

If there is no friction between the moving parts of the car, for how long does it last?

It lasts forever.

Okay. But let's say you take the car and fiddle with the engine. You rebuild your V4 engine and give yourself the more powerful V8. Well, now you've got more power, but at a price. The harmony is gone.

Internally, friction is introduced into the system. The parts, ever so slightly out of balance, grind and eventually wear out. The system will one day break down. Death has become a reality for mankind.

And the "grinding" has other manifestations, too. Just as mankind grinds within himself, he grinds to reproduce himself, too: Childbirth -- previously an effortless experience, now becomes a pain-wracked ordeal. Creativity, the creation of new life, is more jarring now.

Mankind feels the loss of harmony in other ways, too. We find ourselves slightly out of sync with everything else built by the Manufacturer. In the past, the world of nature would effortlessly provide its bounty for Adam. Now, Adam must beat sustenance out of the ground by the sweat of his brow. In the past, we were perfectly in tune with the world around us. Now, when a tsunami stalks silently towards shore, it is the animal world that senses instinctively that something is amiss; it is they that head knowingly for high ground. Man remains enclosed in a world of his own, on vacation at the beach, oblivious to the subtle shrieking of the natural world all around him.

A final manifestation of this disharmony: We must pick up and go, now. As a reader of this column, Machla Abramovitz, remarked to me in an email: Mankind, no longer at home with himself, finds himself no longer at home in the world created for him either. He suffers exile from the Garden, and must make the best of it in new and vaguely foreign terrain.

We are nearing the end of our look at Adam and Eve in the Garden. In our final chapter, we'll tie things together with an exploration of the Almighty's seemingly unnecessary question to Adam, "where are you?". A closer look at the Hebrew, will, I think, reveal some haunting dimensions to this question -- including the intriguing possibility that it may not even be a question at all...

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Take some time to think about it.
History's First Question: Where Are You? Serpents of Desire, Final Chapter

Even as God banished us from Eden, He bequeathed to us the tools we would need to make it in the new world of our own making.

"Where are you?" God calls out to Adam, after he has eaten the Forbidden Fruit. We asked earlier why the Almighty would ask a question whose answer He already knows. It's time to revisit that issue.

As it turns out, there are two words for "where" in Biblical Hebrew. The more common one is "eiphoh" -- but that's not the word the Almighty uses when querying after Adam. He instead invokes the less common word for "where" -- "ayeh".

Is there a difference in meaning between these two words -- and if so, how would one figure out what that difference is? The way to solve such a mystery is not to look at a dictionary -- after all, how did the writers of the dictionary figure it out? -- but to look at a concordance. A concordance is a nifty little book (actually, it's a nifty big book) that lists every occurrence of every word used in the Bible. The point is: If you can trace when and in what contexts the Bible uses the words ayeh and eiphoh, then it becomes possible to connect the dots. The composite picture should point to the unique meaning of each word.

Since I'm in an especially benevolent mood just now, I'll spare you the work of hauling out your concordance. Instead, I'll give you a couple of examples of where each word appears in Biblical literature, and let you draw your conclusions.

Here are a few representative samples of eiphoh and ayeh:

1. Some examples of "eiphoh":
   c. Eiphoh Shmuel V'David? -- "Where are Samuel and David?" (King Saul, searching for his nemesis, David, in I Samuel 19:22).

2. Some examples of "ayeh":
   a. Vayigva adam y'ayamot, v'ayeh? -- "A man dies and then where is he?" (Job 14:10).
   b. Hineh ha'esh...v'ayeh haseh l'olah? -- "Here's the fire, but where is the lamb for the offering?" (Isaac to Abraham, ascending the mountain on the way to the Binding of Isaac; Genesis 22:7).
   c. Ayeh na Eloheihem -- "Where are their gods?" (With reference to idols, Psalms 115:2).
   d. L'imotam yomru ayeh dagan veyayim -- To their mothers, [starving children] will say: where is the grain and wine? (Lamentations, 2:12).

Well, what do you make of it? I'd encourage you to take a minute or two to see if you can isolate a common denominator in each series of quotes.

Okay, time's up. Did you find one? Ready or not, here's my take on it:

I would submit that eiphoh is a more generic kind of "where." That is, eiphoh is generally a straightforward request for location. Joseph, for example, simply wants to know where to find his brothers. Naomi wants to know where Ruth has been that day, and Saul is looking to figure out where in the world David is.

Now let's look at "ayeh." For the most part, when this word is used, I think you'll find that the questioner is not really interested in finding the location of the thing he is asking about. By way of example: "Where is the grain," the starving children wonder. The children know there isn't any grain -- if there was, their mothers would have given it to them long ago. Instead, they are exclaiming in agony: what happened to the grain and wine [we used to have]? The children are not asking where, in fact, the grain is located; rather, they are crying out in anguish over the bald reality that it is not here.

Similarly: Where is the lamb for the offering, Isaac asks his father on the way up the mountain. Isaac's point is not that he can't find the lamb. His point is that there is no lamb to be found, when by rights, there should have been. This apparently innocuous remark by Isaac packs emotional punch because in it, Isaac begins to realize the terrifying truth -- that there is no ram here after all, and that maybe, therefore, he is the ram. In sum, when one asks ayeh, his point is not to find out where something is, but to express wonder that the thing it is not here, where one would have expected it to be...

This dramatically changes the meaning of God's question to Adam. The Almighty was not asking "where are you", a simple request for location. Instead he was asking "where have you gone?" -- why are you not here? As the sages of the Midrash put it:
Where are you? (Genesis, 3:9)

Yesterday, you were with [Me and] my da'at. And now, you are with the da'at of the snake... (Midrash Rabbah, Genesis 19:9)

Ayeh is the kind of question you can ask even when you know where something really is. It's a sadder and more mournful word than eifoh. In a strange coincidence, ayekah is spelled with precisely the same Hebrew letters [aleph, yud, kaf, hei] as eichah, the cardinal Hebrew word for "lament". "Eichah... Look how she sits in solitude... " (Lamentations, 1:1), Jeremiah cries, looking upon a destroyed Jerusalem, pining for the bustling crowds who are no longer here, who have been exiled to Babylonia. Adam and Eve, too, have been exiled. And perhaps, like Jeremiah's eichah, God's outcry ayekah, is less a question than a lament -- a lament at the gulf that now exists between man and his Creator:

I brought Adam into the Garden of Eden and commanded him.
He transgressed My commands.
I decreed exile upon him.
And [upon his departure], I lamented "eichah / ayekah" ["where have you gone..."].

And so it was with his children.
I brought them into the Land of Israel and commanded them.
They transgressed My commands.
I decreed exile upon them.

And [upon their departure], I [once again] lamented "eichah / ayekah" ["where have you gone..."]
(Midrash Bereishis Rabbah 19:9).

TWIN GIFTS

The story of Adam and Eve in the Garden ends with two final acts.

- The Almighty fashions clothes from animal skins for Adam and Eve, to replace the more primitive coverings they had made out of leaves.
- After sending Adam and Eve out of the Garden "lest they eat from the Tree of Life", God stations angels -- cherubs -- with flaming swords at the entrance to Eden to guard the way back to the Tree of Life.

In a strange but poignant way, these two events, I think, are closely tied to one another.

We noticed earlier that cherubs make an appearance just twice in the entire Five Books of Moses. The only other time these angels appear is when their likeness adorns the top of the Holy Ark in the Tabernacle, where they guard the Tablets of the Law. Aptly, the Book of Proverbs describes these tablets, or the Torah they represent, as another Tree of Life -- a tree of life to all who grab hold of it (see Proverbs 3:18). Evidently, the same cherubs who keep us away from one Tree of Life grant us access to another one. Weeks ago, we asked why. And we wondered in what sense the Torah can be seen as a "replacement" Tree of Life.

The answer to these questions should by now be evident. After attaining the knowledge of good and evil, mankind became more godly -- more passionate, more desirous, more insistently creative. But we were only half-gods. To truly be godly means not just to be passionate, possessed of will, as God is. It means not just to create, as God creates -- but to wisely wield the fearsome power of creation. It means to fully control this power; not to be controlled by it. It means keeping passion in balance; realizing that there is a time to create, and a time to desist from creating.

After eating from the Tree of Knowledge, after boosting the role of passion in our lives, living eternally was no longer what the doctor ordered for humankind. A new and different Tree of Life was called for -- one that could help restore balance, harmony, in the psyche of man. The new Tree of Life was designed to help man cope with a new world -- a world in which passion can cloud the mind's eye, obscuring that which is genuinely right and that which is genuinely wrong. The angels that bar man access from one tree of life do indeed grant him access to another one. The Torah is a guide to God's Will, a tool that can help man distinguish the impulses of his own creativity from the deeply held convictions of his Maker. In consuming the fruit of this replacement Tree of Life, in assimilating the viewpoint of the Torah, man would attain a steering wheel to match his engine, making himself into a fully godly being.

Stand back, for a moment, and contemplate what happened here. Even as God banished us from Eden, He bequeathed to us the tools we would need to make it in the new world of our own making....

And now let's talk about God's second act: The making of clothes for Adam and Eve. In the world that God envisioned for man, there would have been no need for clothes; they would have been a superfluity. It was not God's choice that man live in a world where nakedness was something to be feared or avoided. Nevertheless, in this moment of profound disappointment, the Almighty provides Adam and Eve with clothes, giving them the wherewithal to "make it" in this journey of their own choosing.

ADAM'S CLOTHES AND MOSES' GRAVE
The Sages of the Midrash tell us that the Torah begins with an act of kindness, and it ends with an act of kindness. The kindness it begins with is God's providing clothing for Adam and Eve. The kindness it ends with, the rabbis write, is God's act of burying Moses just after he died atop Mt. Nebo, having gazed at the Promised Land but never having set foot there.

In both cases, things had not turned out the way the Master of the Universe might have "wished". Adam and Eve disappointed God by eating from the Tree of Knowledge, and as a result were kept out of Eden, consigned to die on "foreign soil". Moses disappointed God by striking the rock, and as a result was kept out of the Promised Land, consigned to die in the barren desert. In both instances, men had chosen their own path rather than that of their Creator. And in the wake of both events, men would leave behind the world God had set aside for them for other, unknown shores.

God's reaction in both cases is the same. In burying Moses in the earth when no one else was present to do so, He personally provided Moses the means of transition from this world to another one -- a transition which, had God had His way, would not have happened yet. And in providing appropriate clothes for Adam and Eve, He provided them with a means of transition from God's world, from Eden, to a world in which man had chosen on his own. Had God had His way, this transition would not have happened yet either.

The stark reality is that beings who possess free will don't always hew to the hopes and expectations of their creators. If this is so with us in respect to God, it is no less so with our own children in respect to us. If we walk away with anything from this study of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, perhaps we can take this with us: When our children disappoint us, when they make choices we don't approve of; when they exchange the world we have carefully crafted for them for a dubious world of their own making -- perhaps we too, after all the consequences have been meted out, after all the words have been said, after all the anguish has been absorbed -- perhaps we too, can provide them with clothes for the journey.

Rejected Gifts The World's First Murder, Part 1

Why does God reject Cain's gift? Doesn't He know that favoritism can lead to sibling rivalry?

We are reading the Book of Genesis these days. Every Shabbat in synagogue, we listen dutifully to the weekly parasha. But somehow, it all seems to fly by so fast. Occasionally, while listening to the Torah reading in shul, we'll stop to read a perplexing story more carefully. But before we know it, the person reading the Torah is up to the next aliyah. So we shelve our thoughts, and follow along -- with a vague hope that maybe we'll remember the idea next year and get to explore it some more.

If you've ever wanted to "stop the train", and get off and look around at the sights a little -- consider this the invitation you've been waiting for. I invite you to come with me on a on a little adventure. Spend ten minutes a week with me over the next two months or so -- and we'll take a fascinating journey into the heart of one of the Torah's most basic, primal stories: The tale of the World's First Murder, the story of Cain's killing of Abel. It is a story that has much hidden meaning, awaiting our discovery. We'll read it slowly and take our time - even as the scenery of the rest of Genesis flashes by our weekly window.

There are lots of legitimate questions we can ask about the Biblical story of Cain and Abel. But I'm going to begin this discussion of the episode by asking you a question that I consider to be wrong-headed and misleading. The question, I think, is based on a fundamental misreading of the text. But I'm going to ask it anyway.

Why would I do such a thing? To be perfectly frank, if I thought I could get away with ignoring the question, I would. But I don't think I can. The question is too obvious and too troubling. My guess is that most people who look at the Cain and Abel story are immediately bothered by some shape or form of this question. So we might as well talk about it. If we don't, you'll just think I'm avoiding it.

To see the question, we need to briefly summarize the story we are looking at. Here's a 30 second snapshot of the narrative -- followed by my best, devil's-advocate-style rendition of a question I don't really believe in:

Cain and Abel, children of Adam and Eve, each bring offerings to the Lord. The Almighty expresses pleasure with the offering brought by Abel, but not with that brought by his older brother Cain. Cain becomes very upset. Shortly afterwards, he kills his brother Abel.

Well class, there's more to the story than that, but why don't we stop here for the time being. Let's go around the room: Is everyone here happy with this story?

I see a lot of shaking heads.

OK. What's wrong with this picture?
To be sure, the story doesn't leave you with that warm and fuzzy feeling inside. But what's really jarring though, is not Cain's act of murder. We know from experience that human beings are capable of doing really bad things. What's really jarring -- at least at first glance -- is the pattern of behavior embarked upon by the Almighty.

Cain brings an offering and God turns away from it to favor Abel's gift instead. Abel's gift was nicer and prettier perhaps than Cain's. The text suggests as much, telling us that Abel brought, "from the first of his flocks and from their choicest," while we hear no such detail about Cain's offering. But a little voice inside us asks insistently: Why does God have to reject one and accept the other?

Imagine for a moment the scene: You're the mommy, and Bobby and Debbie, your sparkling, wonderful children, are both working on some surprise homemade birthday presents for you. They've got their colored pencils out, and are busy creating custom art projects for you. Soon enough they are done, and each comes over to display their work. Debbie walks over first. She proudly shows you her colorful, detailed drawing. She points to the hills, to the sunset, to the little cabin by the stream next to the trees. And she presents the picture to you with a gleam in her eyes: "Here, Mommy ... its your birthday present!"

Next it's Bobby's turn. Bobby's drawing isn't as detailed. It hardly has much color, and the people who inhabit its landscape are mostly stick figures. Bobby looks at you expectantly, and now it's your turn to speak.

What do you do?

Every parent in the world knows what to do. You smile, you look at Bobby, you look at Debbie, and then you say: "My, what beautiful pictures you children have made for me!" And you dote them with love and appreciation.

And what happens if the kids are insistent? "No, Mommy, really!" they squeal, "Tell us which painting you like better!" What do you do then?

Well, you know the drill, "I think they are both wonderful," you say, as convincingly as possible, as you shoo them off to bed. "They are each beautiful in their own way!"

And what do we think of the parent who doesn't take this approach? Imagine a parent who gently praises Debbie for her meticulously drawn houses, for the carefully chosen hues of green she used for the grass and flowers. But then she turns to Bobby and her expression changes as she surveys the choppy lines and scribbles. She exclains, "Oh, Bobby! What kind of drawing is this? You call these people? They are barely stick figures. And that's a sunset? Please, I can barely see the sun. Come on, Bobby, look at what Debbie made for me. Now there's the way to use your crayons!"

This is not what most of us would call good parenting. It's the kind of thing, we would worry, that's going to put Bobby on the psychiatrist's couch for many years later down the road.

So now let's look at the Cain and Abel story. Both Cain and Abel offer their "presents" to God. And God doesn't smile and say "My, they're both so wonderful!" Instead God rejects Cain's offering and accepts Abel's.

But I thought parents aren't supposed to do that.

What's going on here? In the story of Cain and Abel, don't we have a classic case of Bobby and Debbie on our hands? What are we to make of the fact that God dismisses our intuitive parenting advice? Is the Bible trying to disabuse us of our "modern" notions of parenting in favor of something more stern and unforgiving?

**Bobby and Debbie Redux**

Before giving you my solution to this problem, allow me to make matters worse for a brief few minutes. Let's get back to Bobby and Debbie and ask: What happens next?

Imagine you were Bobby and Debbie's mother, and when your two children had each presented their respective gifts to you, you had inexplicably disregarded that basic rule of parenting, and had favored Debbie's gift over Bobbie's. Now a half hour later you walk by Bobby's room and find him weeping softly into his pillow. You ask him what's the matter and he turns to you and whimpers, "You told me you didn't like my present..." and then comes the kicker, something my child has tried on me one or two times. He says, "Mommies aren't supposed to say things like that to their kids."

How would you react to Bobby's plaintive cries?

Instinctively, most parents -- even those who had initially favored Debby's gift -- would be unable to resist the sight of a weeping Bobby. Most of us would recognize the error of our ways, would scoop Bobby into their arms and apologize for having turned our back on his gift. "You're right," we'd tell him, "Mommy loves you and I'm so sorry for not accepting your gift the way I should have." We'd apologize; we'd tell Bobby we'd had a hard day at work, we weren't paying enough attention; we'd tell him it won't happen again; we'd tell him just about anything in our desperate attempt to make things right.

But that's not how it happens in the Cain and Abel story.
Just after God rejects Cain's offering, and immediately before Cain murders his brother, the Almighty speaks to Cain. But God does not soothingly tell Cain that everything will be just fine, that his offering really was pretty good after all. Instead God challenges Cain, asking him whether he really has a right to be angry:

*Why are you angry and why has your face fallen? Is it not the case that if you do well, then lift up! And if you don't do well, then, sin lies crouching at the door.* (Genesis 4:6-7)

What if the parent who had accepted Debbie's gift but not Bobby's had told the weeping Bobby that if he had done better everything would be just fine; that he should just get over it. Most of us would be ready to pick up the phone and call Social Services. But, how then, are we supposed to come to grips with the Almighty's words to Cain?

And now, dear reader, the ball is in your court. I mentioned before that I felt that the questions I am asking here are not really legitimate. It is my view that the analogy to Bobby and Debbie is faulty and misleading. If you re-read the story of Cain and Abel carefully, I think you should be able to spot the flaw; you should be able to see why Bobby and Debby's sorry plight actually has little indeed to do with the story of Cain and Abel.

**The Enigmatic Genius of Cain The World's First Murder, Part 2**

The story of Cain and Abel is not a simple scenario of sibling rivalry.

In considering the Bobby and Debbie scenario I outlined last chapter, some would argue that the Almighty made a "parenting mistake" here. Such a view is rather in vogue lately among contemporary interpreters. In Bill Moyer's nationally televised discussion of Genesis, for example, a fair number of participants were inclined to take this perspective. But the implications of this view are dramatic and harsh, and we might as well be clear about them.

First, it is a tricky business to ascribe errors in judgment to the Almighty. To do so is quite likely heresy from a theological point of view. But even if heresy doesn't scare you, from a simple rational perspective, it seems preposterous to suggest that the Creator of All lacks basic wisdom about parenting. It just is very hard to swallow that the Master of the Universe is less sophisticated about parenting than, say, Dr. Spock or the self-help guru who showed up last week on Oprah to hawk her book.

Evidently something is rotten with this comparison to Bobby and Debbie. Somehow God's acceptance of Abel's offering and His rejection of Cain's was not like mommy's preference of Debbie's pretty picture over Bobby's stick figures. Why?

Let's go back to Bobby and Debbie, for a moment, and try to isolate the parenting "sin" that takes place when Mommy tells her kids whose painting she likes better. What exactly is she doing wrong?

**Why My Kids Hate Playing by the Rules of "Boggle"**

The great sin, I think, lies in Mommy's stated or implied comparison of Bobby to Debbie. When Bobby and Debbie compete for Mommy's love, when they ask whose painting she likes better, that question is a trap. The question, even if asked in the spirit of childhood innocence or playfulness, pits two siblings against each other in a terrible battle for the love and approval of their creator. If the parent buys into this game; if he or she agrees to play referee in this great game of combat, he or she has failed before even saying a word. The terms of play are themselves rotten.

This is not to say that it is wrong for Mommy or Daddy to evaluate their kids, or to give or withhold approval -- only that it is wrong to judge one kid using the other as a benchmark. The essential point of illegitimacy here is the false sense of competition: the fact that Debby becomes the measuring stick by which Bobby is judged; the fact that, as a result, neither Bobby's nor Debbie's acts are really being seen as valuable in and of themselves, but only insofar as they measure up or outshine the accomplishments of the other.

There is a game we sometimes play around the table with our kids. It is a word game by the name of "Boggle." In Boggle each player looks at a grid of letters and has sixty seconds to identify a list of words that emerge from contiguous letters. There is a rule in Boggle that all my kids universally hate. The rule is that if all the players around the table have discovered the same word, no one gets any credit for it. Every kid is supposed to just strike those words from their list; they simply don't count.

Now from a strictly utilitarian point of view, this rule makes a lot of sense. It simplifies the process of keeping score. But it's the message behind that rule, I think, which draws my kids' ire. The message is, "*What you found, what you discovered, doesn't count if your brother Bobby found it too.*" Your acts don't have inherent worth or value; they can be "canceled out" by what your siblings do or don't do.

**Did Cain Get Compared to Abel -- or to Himself?**
Now let's look at the story of Cain and Abel, this time, reading it a little more carefully. Ask yourself, Why did God reject the offering brought by Cain?

Let's read the text and see what it tells us about each brother's offering:

*And in the process of time it happened that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering to the Lord. And Abel, he also brought of the first of his flocks and of their choicest ones. And the Lord turned to the offering of Abel, but to Cain and his offering He did not turn.*

*(Genesis, 4:3-5)*

Look carefully here. The text does say that Abel took "from the first of his flocks and from their choicest ones," whereas with Cain we hear no such detail, only that he brought "of the fruit of the ground." The implication is that Abel offered the best of what he had, whereas Cain simply offered some of what he had -- average produce, produce that didn't stand out as either the best or worst of what he had.

But ask yourself this deceptively simple question:

*When measured against each other, which offering was of a higher quality?*

You might be tempted to answer that it was Abel's -- Abel brought the better stuff. But the real answer is: We simply don't know.

Nowhere is there evidence to suggest that Abel's offering was worth more or was superior to Cain's. We know that Abel offered the best of what he had, whereas Cain offered simply some of what he had. It is entirely possible that Cain's offering was worth more; that his "average" stuff was of a higher quality than the best of what Abel had. We just don't know. The bottom line is: Abel brought the best he could; Cain didn't. Each brother is not compared to the other, but to himself. What he did is being compared to what he could have done.

If Bobby and Debbie both show up with pictures for Mommy's birthday, and Mommy discerns that Debbie did the best she could with the picture, while Bobby's picture looks like something he threw together while watching *The Simpsons,* it is entirely appropriate for Mommy to note this fact. It doesn't matter that Bobby might be the better artist; that, at an art auction, Bobby's absent-minded doodles might fetch a greater price than Debbie's carefully crafted sunset. All that is irrelevant. If Mommy senses that, relative to his own talents, Bobby presented her with something nondescript, she is entitled to feel that something is not right, and to make her feelings known.

All of which brings us to a very important question: Why did Cain do what he did? If you're going to bring an offering to God already, one would think that one would bring the good stuff. What exactly was Cain thinking?

**The Enigmatic Genius of Cain**

In our mind's eye, I think we often construct an inaccurate portrait of Cain. One tends to think of Cain as a grudging imitator of Abel. We imagine, perhaps, that Cain saw his brother bringing an offering to God and, not wanting to be outdone, Cain figured he would play along. His heart wasn't really in it though, so he didn't bring the best of what he had.

But in reality it didn't happen like that. It wasn't Abel who had the brainstorm to bring the first offering -- it was Cain. Cain was the originator -- the first person in the history of the world to bring an offering to God.

It seems strange to say so, but this fact alone qualifies Cain as a kind of spiritual genius. Whatever else one may think of the notion of offerings to God, one thing is sure -- the idea has stood the test of time. A wheel may seem simple and obvious, but its inventor is a genius. Cain, too, was a kind of genius -- he began something, and hundreds of religions representing millions and millions of people have followed suit.

All in all, this makes Cain a much harder figure to peg.

How are we to understand a man who introduces the idea of offerings to the world -- but then, when he actually brings this first of all offerings, brings nondescript, average produce? If you are an innovator, you are not likely to be the kind of person who does things halfway. Why does Cain, the bold inventor of offerings, not bring the best of what he has to God? Cain's genius is enigmatic indeed.

In broad terms, I think this is perhaps the central challenges the Bible puts before us here: How are we to decipher Cain? Like it or not, the story is not really about Abel. He just gets killed, and we know nothing more of him. It is Cain whose legacy endures. It is Cain whose acts and thoughts are the focus of our story. It is Cain the Torah is asking us to try and understand.

**A Question of Placement**

Our quest to make sense of this story can be helped, I think, by pulling back our zoom lens and getting a broad, landscape view of our narrative. Here's a bit of homework, if you will: Let's take some time to look at the broad context in which our story appears. Is there any meaning in the fact that the Cain and Abel story appears in the Bible precisely where it does?
On one level, there doesn't seem to be anything remarkable about the placement of the story. It comes right after the episode of Adam and Eve in the Garden, presumably because that's when it took place. The narrative appears here because that is its rightful place in the chronology of events. Right?

Well, yes. But sometimes, chronology isn't everything. The links between juxtaposed Biblical stories often run far deeper than the incidental fact that one story happened right before or after another. Stories that appear next to each other in the Bible often shed light on each other in surprising ways.

Is that the case with the Cain and Abel narrative? Is the story of mankind's first murder connected in any essential, meaningful, way to the events that precede it -- namely Adam and Eve's experience with the Forbidden Fruit, and their subsequent banishment from Eden?

Re-read the story carefully, and see if you can find any clues. We'll talk again next week.

1) It is true, of course, that the Bible itself speaks of God "regretting" having made mankind. But the Bible also speaks of the "outstretched arm" of God, and few of us are willing to concede that God has arms. The Bible uses anthropomorphism with reference to God now and then, speaking of the Almighty -- a Being whose essence we cannot begin to understand -- in human terms that we can understand. When the Bible does so, though, we are getting just a faint approximation of reality. Whatever God's "arm" means, it doesn't mean a structure composed of bone and flesh that God uses to eat his dinner with. And whatever God's "regret" means, it doesn't mean the fairly prosaic emotion that afflicts us mortals when we realize we've made a boo boo. The regret of an all powerful, all-knowing being is of a different nature altogether, and its true meaning is shrouded in mystery.

Echoes of Eden The World's First Murder, Part 3

The connection between the story of Cain and Abel and the story of Adam and Eve is not easily deduced, but very relevant.

The story of Cain and Abel seems like a tale that could have happened at any point in history:

One day, two brothers bring offerings to God. God favors one over the other, and the spurned brother murders the favored one.

For most of us, that's all we need to know. Two brothers become rivals, and the rivalry ends in murder. It hardly seems to matter where in the Bible this story appears. It seems a mere point of trivia that Cain and Abel were the children of Eve; that this story immediately follows the Tree of Knowledge saga; that not so long ago, Adam and Eve ate from the Forbidden Fruit and were exiled from Eden. Yes, all that is true -- but it all seems incidental. When we read of Cain and Abel, we envision a blank slate, a new chapter in the history of mankind.

But slates are rarely as blank as they seem.

I am going to argue to you that the story of Cain and Abel bears the unmistakable imprint of the story that immediately precedes it, the Tree of Knowledge saga. The Biblical text, in a number of subtle and not so subtle ways, seems to go out of its way to connect these two very different stories. We can wonder why the Torah does this, what it is trying to tell us. We can debate that. But the fact of the connection is, I think, not debatable. For some reason, the story of Cain and Abel is suffused with the memories of Eden. That's just the way it is.

You don't have to take my word for any of this. You can see it for yourself.

Re-read the story of Cain and Abel. But don't just read it in a vacuum. Read it side by side with the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden. At face value, the stories couldn't seem more different. One deals with talking snakes and Forbidden Fruit; the other with a spurned offering and an act of murder. But look a little more closely. Hidden in the verses of Cain and Abel you will find a curious abundance of parallels to the story of the Forbidden Fruit. Certain key phrases, ideas or events appear in one story, then unexpectedly, re-appear in the next one. See if you can find them.

* * *

I hope you've taken a few moments to look over both stories. In any case, you've had your chance; I've closed my eyes and counted to ten and ready or not, here I come. I'll tell you what I came up with, and you can tell me if it matches your list.

In the first few verses of the story, nothing obvious reminds us of Adam and Eve in the Garden. But don't get discouraged; keep reading...
A "Missing Persons" Alert

Immediately after Cain kills his brother, God addresses Cain with a question:

\[\text{And God said to Cain: "Where is Abel, your brother?" (Genesis 4:9)}\]

One second. That part seems familiar, doesn't it? In the Eden story, there was a question like that, too -- no? After Adam commits his great misdeed -- after he eats from the Forbidden Fruit -- God addresses him with a question as well:

\[\text{G-d called out to Adam and said to him: "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:9)}\]

In each story God quests after a "missing person." And the quest itself is of a very particular kind. It takes the form of the question "ayeh" -- where is he?

There are two Hebrew words for "where." The more common one is eiphoh; the less common is ayeh. In each of these two stories, it is the less common, ayeh form of "why" which God asks.

What's the difference between eiphoh and ayeh? Eiphoh seems to be a more generic "where," a basic request for location. Ayeh, on the other hand, is used when the questioner is less interested in where something is than in why it is not here, where it ought to be. In Eden it is the ayeh question that is asked: Not where is Adam, but where has Adam gone? What happened to him?

\[\text{Not where is Abel, but where has Abel gone? What happened to him?}\]

Hide and Seek

Let's go on. How do Adam and Cain respond to the ayeh question from the Almighty?

Adam, overcome with the consequences of his deed, aware of his newfound vulnerability, states that he has been hiding from God:

\[\text{I heard your voice in the garden and was afraid because I was naked and I hid. (Genesis 3:10)}\]

At first glance we don't find anything comparable in the Cain story. We do not find Cain trying to hide behind any bushes, nor does Cain complain about being naked. But listen carefully to the following two verses, and see if you can't discern in them the echo of Adam's words:

\[\text{And Cain said to God, "My sin is greater than I can bear. Here you have cast me away today from upon the face of the earth and from your face I will hide; I will be a wanderer in the land, and everyone that finds me will kill me." (Genesis 4:13-14)}\]

Just as Adam speaks of hiding from God, so does Cain: Tucked into Cain's response to God is a curious premonition that he is destined to spend his life hiding from the Almighty, "...and from your face I will hide."

Adam hides in the past tense: At a particular point in time, he hides from God and then explains to the Almighty that he has done so. Cain hides in the future tense. Having been banished to a life of exile, Cain intuits that he will spend his days in a continual state of isolation from his Maker.

No Place Like Home

Besides Cain's premonition that he will hide from God, there are other reminders of Eden in the consequences that befall Cain after he kills his brother.

After having eaten from the Forbidden Fruit, Adam is told that he and Eve must leave Eden, never to return. They are exiled from the only home they know.

But Cain, too, must leave home, "...a wanderer shall you be throughout the land" (Genesis 4:12).

Adam and Eve, in the wake of their sin, are forced to leave Eden and make a home for themselves elsewhere. Cain, in the aftermath of his sin, cannot find a home anywhere.

To Be Cursed From the Ground

In addition to perpetual exile, the Almighty imposes one more curse upon Cain. Henceforth, Cain's efforts at farming will meet with frustration.

\[\text{And now: Cursed are you from the ground that has opened its mouth to take your brothers blood from your hand. When you work the land, it will not continue to give its strength to you. (Genesis 4:11-12)}\]
Once again we seem to be transported back to the Eden story. It is not just Cain who experienced difficulty farming at the behest of the Almighty. Adam too, in the aftermath of eating from the Tree of Knowledge, had found himself hearing very similar words from God:

*Cursed is the land on your account; in toil will you eat form it all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles will it grow for you, and you will eat the grass of the field. By the sweat of your brow will you eat bread.* (Genesis 3:17-19)

Adam is told that he must wrest his sustenance from the ground; Cain is told that although he works the land, it will no longer give its strength to him.

So now let's add it all up.

- Both Adam and Cain hear the Divine question: "Ayeh?"
- Both Adam and Cain express fear, and hide from God.
- Both Adam and Cain suffer exile.
- Both Adam and Cain are condemned to experience difficulty in farming.

Clearly the Cain story is filled with the imagery, language and ideas that animate Adam and Eve's banishment from the Garden. Somehow, Adam and Eve's experience in Eden is gone but not forgotten. Somehow, the silent presence -- or absence of -- the Garden continues to dominate and define the lives of those who have long since left its confines.

The mystery behind these connections goes a little deeper though, for there is more to these connections than immediately meets the eye.

### A Growing Intensity

A pattern seems to weave itself into these four connections. The elements are not simply repeated from story to story; rather, each element expresses itself a little differently when it reappears a second time. There is a pattern to these differences. Can you find it?

- **Ayeh** -- In the Garden of Eden, God seeks the whereabouts of a temporarily missing person (Adam). In the story of Cain and Abel, the person He seeks (Abel) is gone for good.
- **Hiding** -- In the immediate aftermath of his sin, Adam hides from God momentarily. Cain, on the other hand, intuits that he will spend his life hiding from God; that he will do so perpetually in the indefinite future.
- **Exile** -- Before eating from the Tree, Adam and Eve called paradise their home. Now, they would have to leave these idyllic environs, to build a new home elsewhere. Cain too, suffers exile, but of a different magnitude altogether: No matter where he seeks to build his home, the land will not graciously offer him shelter. Not only must he leave home, but he will never be able to call anyplace his home.
- **Difficulty Farming** -- After eating the Forbidden Fruit, Adam would have to wrest bread out of the ground "by the sweat of his brow." He would have to work to till the land, he would have to fight weeds and thorns -- but at the end of the day he would have his bread. Cain, on the other hand, is told that even if he works the land with mighty toil, "it will not continue to give its strength to you." Cain will experience a fundamental loss of agricultural potential. The land simply won't produce what it once did anymore.

In each of these four examples, the response to Cain's wrongdoing seems to be a more intense version of Adam's experience. Whatever happened in the wake of Adam & Eve's eating from the Forbidden Fruit, happens again after Cain murders Abel -- but when it happens a second time, it happens with greater force and impact. Each of these connecting elements intensify in the story of Cain.

What is the Bible telling us here?

### A Tentative Theory

At the very least, it seems that these stories are connected. But the fact that the consequences intensify from story to story suggests more, I think, than some sort of mere casual connection between the narratives. It suggests that there is a progression going on. It suggests that failure in Eden sets the stage for Cain and Abel. It is as if you could place the two stories -- Adam and Eve in the Garden, and Cain and Abel -- on successive steps of a ladder. When you face the challenge of the Garden and fail that sets up a new challenge -- a challenge that is a "next" step on the same ladder. The consequences for failure in the second challenge are rightfully the same as they were at the earlier level, only that they are felt more intensely.

All of this, of course, is easy to say -- but what does it mean in real life? Why would a story about eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil set up a story about sibling rivalry, spurned sacrifices and murder? If the Cain and Abel story is about offering the wrong thing to the Almighty; if it is about the inability of two brothers to get along; if it is about the terrible fruits of jealousy -- what does this have to do with the choice to eat from a mysterious tree that Go put off-limits? How really, are the challenges faced in one story in any way similar to the challenges faced in the other?

Somehow, the questions which Cain faces -- what kind of offering to bring to God; whether to invite Abel for a menacing stroll in the field -- are born somehow of Adam's decision to eat the Forbidden Fruit. Our challenge will be to figure out how this is so.
Blood on the Ground: The World's First Murder, Part 4

If it was up to you to sentence the first murderer in the history of the world, what punishment would you impose?

You'd probably try to come up with something that fits the crime. Perhaps Cain should himself be killed to avenge his brother's blood. If you were in a less punitive frame of mind, you might argue that Cain should be forced to experience something that teaches him about the horrors of murder. Or, if you were really in a lenient mood, you might opt for a rigorous community service assignment: Maybe Cain should be required to contribute in some fundamental way to the building of human society.

But God does not choose any of these options. Here is the Almighty's response:

*And now: Cursed are you from the ground that has opened its mouth to take the blood of your brother from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer give its strength to you; a wanderer shall you be throughout the land. (Genesis 4:11-12)*

God declares that Cain shall be "cursed from the earth," that he shall experience difficulty farming and that he will be a wanderer. But what does any of this have to do with Cain's act of killing his brother?

The verse, of course, supplies an answer. It says that the earth has "opened its mouth to accept" Abel's blood -- and for this reason, Cain shall experience a curse with respect to that same earth. But there's something less than satisfying, at least at face value, with this explanation. One can't help feeling that the ground's role is rather incidental here: It happened to be that Abel's blood fell on the ground and soaked into the earth, but that doesn't describe the essential heinousness of the crime, does it? If Abel's blood had fallen on the kitchen floor instead, would Cain have been cursed through linoleum tiles?

**A Focus on Ground**

A closer look at things reveals something astir in this text. For some reason, the "earth" is very important in these verses. The ground is not an incidental part of Cain's punishment; it is the essential core of it. Everything that happens to him is phrased in terms of the ground. First Cain is told that he will be cursed "from the land;" then, that when he works the land, it will no longer give its strength to him; and finally, that he will be a wanderer throughout the land. The Torah's focus on land here is relentless, and Cain's anguish in the face of all this is palpable, "My sin is greater than I can bear... here you have cast me away from the face of the earth..." (Genesis 4:13, 14).

Why of all things is Cain's relationship to the ground targeted by the Almighty in response to his act of fratricide? And why is Cain so deeply affected by this?

**Cain's Name and His Profession**

A clue, perhaps, comes from two things we find out about Cain the moment we are introduced to him. The text tells us his name and his profession. He is called Cain, and he chooses to be a farmer. Curiously these two facts seem to be related.

We tend to think of names as fairly incidental pieces of information. But in the Bible, that assumption doesn't always hold up. Names are often important clues. When we name people, we try to embody our hopes for them; we try to sum up who we think they are, or hope they will be. All the more so with Cain, for in fact, Cain was never actually named Cain. He just was Cain, "...and Eve conceived and bore Cain" (Genesis 4:1).

Other children in the Bible -- Ishmael, Moses and Samuel, for example -- are given names by parents or by others, but not Cain. In his case, the association between name and identity runs even deeper. He is not someone merely named Cain, he is Cain; he embodies the word. But what does Cain mean?

In Hebrew, Cain's name is kayin. The context suggests, as we will explore a bit more in coming articles, that the name derives from the word kanah, which means acquire.

Cain the farmer works the earth, and Cain the "acquirer" seeks to ground himself in possessions. For both, land -- ground -- is indispensable.

**Why Real Estate is So Real**

It is no coincidence that people call land "real estate." It is called that because it is the most "real" thing we can have. By comparison, everything else is transitory. Everything else comes and goes. Even we come and go. We die and are gone, but not land. Land sticks around, and having it makes us feel real; it makes us feel anchored to something that lasts.
Cain the "acquirer" has a special relationship to land.

It is here that we come to an interesting difference between Cain and Abel. While Cain comes from the word *kanah*, acquire, Abel comes from the very opposite. In Hebrew, Abel is pronounced *hevel*, which means, of all things, breath, or more precisely, the steam that escapes one's mouth on a cold winter's day.

*Hevel* is a word that appears elsewhere in the Bible. Its most common string of occurrences is in the Book of Ecclesiastes. The word *hevel* is, in fact, the first word in that book, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity," says Solomon in Ecclesiastes. Except what he's really saying is "*hevel havalim*." Everything is *hevel*, everything is breath.

What does it mean to say everything is breath? It goes to the very heart of the Book of Ecclesiastes. In that book, Solomon, one of the richest, most successful men to ever live, reveals his anguish -- an anguish that is, ironically, the stepchild of his success. His distress comes from the realization that his achievements will not, cannot, last. Everything, Solomon declares, is like breath. It all dissipates. It all ends with death. At the great door to the next world you have to leave everything behind you.

It is not just that you can't take your wealth or possessions with you. That would be bad enough. But the successful man wants more than wealth. He wants to make a difference; he wants to leave his mark on the world. Here, too, he is frustrated by the problem of "breath." All the rivers flow to the sea, Solomon observes, but it doesn't seem to matter. The sea is still not full. We try to make a lasting impression, but in the end, only one thing lasts, "One generation comes, one generation goes, but the land lasts forever" (Ecclesiastes 1:4).

The earth itself outlasts us. It alone, in the world we inhabit, has the aura of permanence, and by clinging to the earth, we achieve a measure of solace against the great terror of *hevel*, of breath.

Hevel -- Abel/breath -- dies. Hevel is unattached and transitory; he chooses to herd sheep, but Cain the acquirer attaches himself to the ground -- he becomes a worker of the earth -- and relentlessly seeks to share in its permanence.

**Triangular Consequences**

And now we come back to the consequences for Cain's act of murder.

If you look carefully, I think you'll find that the three elements of Cain's punishment are closely related. They form a kind of triangle, if you will. The top of the triangle states a principle, and the two sides express how the principle plays out.

The top of the triangle is the general, opening statement that Cain will be "cursed from the land"¹ -- that Cain will be separated from the ground. And what is the effect of this separation between Cain and the earth? For that, we look to the two sides of the triangle. The effect is that Cain becomes a wanderer and that he experiences difficulty farming.

We human beings get two basic things from the ground. Firstly, the ground "grounds" us; it gives us a place to be. Secondly, the ground nourishes us. The soil provides us with the fruits and vegetation that we cultivate through agriculture.

Cain related to both these aspects of ground. He cultivated the earth in an effort to partake of its nourishment, and he was the "acquirer," a man seeking "grounding." Now, in both these respects, Cain becomes "distant" -- cursed -- from the ground.

First off, the ground will no longer give him a place to be. He will become a wanderer, unable to settle down anywhere.² But it is not just in the sense of "home and hearth" that Cain is rootless. Cain's lack of roots expresses itself quite literally in an inability to cultivate roots, an inability to succeed in the great enterprise of agriculture. The second leg of Cain's triangle is that the ground will no longer give its strength to him. It will no longer provide him with the bounty he had sought through farming.

**A Divorce from the Earth**

For Cain, the impact of this triangle of consequences -- curse "from" the ground, being a wanderer, difficulty farming -- seems less economic than personal. He has been distanced from something that really matters. This, at least, is how Cain himself seems to see it, "My sin is greater than I can bear. Here, you have cast me away today from upon the face of the earth and from Your Face I will hide" (Genesis 4:13,14)

When Cain speaks of being "cast away" from the earth, the Hebrew word is *geirashti*. Speakers of Hebrew will be familiar with the word. Its other meaning is divorce; the termination of the marriage bond between a man and woman. In Cain's eyes, he has been rejected, separated -- *divorced*, even -- from the earth. This painful distance expresses itself in the two fundamental ways the earth takes care of us, in its ability to give us a home and in its capacity to nourish us. In both these ways, Cain finds himself at odds with earth.

We have begun to see how the twin portraits of Cain the farmer and Cain the "acquirer" start to merge for a fuller portrait of Cain and the consequences that befall him. But in so doing, we have glimpsed just a part of a much larger and more expansive picture. For in fact, the links between Cain the farmer and Cain the "acquirer" go much deeper than this. Indeed, if we look carefully at these two aspects of Cain, we may begin to discern the answers to the two
fundamental questions we raised recently: Why Cain, a man bold enough to bring the first recorded offering to God in the history of mankind, would choose to give merely average produce as his gift. And why the story of Cain seems so eerily reminiscent of the story of Eden.

1 Yes, the syntax is awkward, but in Hebrew, that's exactly what the text says: that Cain will be cursed "from" the ground. The strange phrase can either mean that the ground is the source of Cain's curse, (the one doing the cursing, as it were), or that the effect of the curse is to separate Cain "from" the land. Either way, the sense is that a rupture has occurred between Cain and the ground. The earth is being portrayed in strangely sentient and personal terms, and the implication is that something has gone wrong with Cain's relationship with this being, the earth.

2 Interestingly, the end of the story tells us that Cain settles in the land of Nod, and that he builds a city which he names after his son. At first glance, Cain seems to succeed in subverting his decree of exile. But the place he "settles" in is not really a place; its name is the Land of Nod, a Hebrew term that means "the Land of Wandering." And, as the classic commentator Nachmanides notes, the Torah speaks of Cain's urban construction project -- his building of a city -- in the present tense. The text doesn't say, as you might expect, that Cain built a city and dedicated it to his son, but rather that: Cain was building a city and dedicated it to his son...

Nachmanides suggests that the present tense indicates that Cain never finished the project. He was perpetually "building," starting at one point, then stopping, then starting again, always dreaming the dream, but never able to see the project through to completion. Cain desperately seeks to ground himself -- to make a home for himself, or to build a whole city full of homes, but he is a wanderer. The harder he tries, the more the dream evades him. He is truly rootless, condemned in every sense of the word to a life of complete transience.

Eve Acquires a Son: The World's First Murder, Part 5

Eve's reaction to the birth of her son gives us insight into Cain's nature and motivations.

We asked a question a little while ago that I'd like to start turning our attention back to now: would Cain, the first person ever recorded to have offered something to God, choose to bring merely average produce in that offering? would an innovator choose to do something half-way?

In looking around for some clues that might help us with this, it's hard to know where to turn. The text itself is very sparse, which is to say, it doesn't tell us all that much about Cain before he goes and offers his offering, before he goes and kills his brother, but it does tell us something. We are told Cain's name and his profession. He is a man called Cain, and he chooses to become a farmer, a worker of the land.

I mentioned in the previous article that these two things we know about Cain seem related: They both appear to revolve around land. But I also left you with a homework assignment: To see if you could discern an even deeper level of connection between these two facts, the fact of his name and the fact of his livelihood. If we can succeed in doing this, it may help us understand what motivates Cain, and why he makes the choices he does.

It's time, then, to get to your homework.

Eve

The truth is we know more about Cain's name than just what it was. We also know how he got it. The text clues us in to the words his mother spoke when she was giving birth to him: "[Eve] conceived and bore Cain. And she said, 'I have acquired a man with God'" (Genesis, 4:1).

At first glance Eve's exclamation seems a trivial piece of information -- a nice bit of color commentary to be sure -- but rather unrelated to a larger story that revolves around offerings, jealousy and murder. Surely though, the Bible is not reporting mere delivery room banter here. Eve has said something significant. She has said something that matters to our story, otherwise, we wouldn't be hearing about it. But why does it matter?

To see the true significance of her words, the first thing we have to do is gently un-tether ourselves from our English translations. In English, the verse seems to be telling you two disconnected facts: That Eve, after having a child named Cain, just happened to utter such and such a phrase. But the Hebrew tells an entirely different story. Listen to the Hebrew for a moment, "...vateled et kayin, vatoma, 'kaniti ish et Elokim" (Genesis 4:1).

After giving birth to kayin, Eve says kaniti ish et Elokim. The name Cain, or in Hebrew kayin, is a paraphrase of the words his mother utters when giving birth to him -- that she has "acquired," kaniti, a man with God.1

Evidently Cain's name derives, somehow, from what his mother had to say when birthing him. It behooves us then, to see if we can understand what she was trying to say.

The Wonder of it All
"I have acquired a man with God."

The phrase, at first, seems kind of strange and cryptic. We might understand it though, if we consider what we might have said had we found ourselves in Eve's position.

Eve just went through an event we've gotten used to calling "childbirth." Yet Eve didn't just experience any run-of-the-mill act of childbirth, if indeed one can call any birth ordinary. She was a principal in the first human birth in the history of mankind.

As a father I am obviously limited in my ability to talk from experience here. But if I can extrapolate anything from the way my wife looks back at the moments she gave birth to our kids, I can tell you that a woman experiences this event as a supreme wonder. Yes the experience is usually painful beyond words -- but at least in my wife's case, the enormity of the pain mixed with her palpable sense of awe at what was happening. She was experiencing the creation of a new being, literally, from the inside out. She was not a passive bystander in that experience. She was herself a partner in a new, bold, visceral act of creation.

A partner with whom?

Well the obvious answer would be me, the father. But I'm actually not referring to myself here. It is humbling to say so, but the man's role in all this is rather fleeting, and a woman, in the throes of childbirth, can easily overlook it. At least Eve apparently did. The partner I am referring to is another being -- the force, as it were, behind the womb.

The womb is an astounding organ. Hundreds of years of medical technology and billions of dollars of research have proven unable to replicate it, let alone design one from scratch. We have learned how to conceive fetuses in test tubes, but we cannot grow them into children without a womb. A child that leaves this special place more than a few months before his time simply has no chance of surviving. There is no such thing as an artificial womb.

The uniqueness of the womb is a bit surprising, since at first glance, it doesn't seem to do all that much. But it is precisely the womb's quietness -- its ability to be still, to listen, and to gently respond -- that is its genius. Modern science has revealed the womb to be an exquisitely sensitive organ, a vehicle that senses its occupant's every need, and tailors itself to accommodate that need. It provides a precise and ever-changing balance of nutrients; it maintains perfectly calibrated PH levels; it discreetly disposes of toxins; it provides the right enzymes and antibodies at precisely the right time, and in just the right doses. The biochemistry is complex beyond imagining. A womb is not the work of humans. We could have never devised it. Through her womb, a woman encounters not just her child, but the Almighty Himself. In her creativity, she experiences the nearness of the Creator of All.

If every woman who goes through childbirth is at least dimly aware of this mystery -- if every woman, at least to some extent, senses the "science-fiction-like" quality of childbirth -- think of how Eve must have felt. What she went through didn't just seem utterly new and unprecedented. It was utterly new and unprecedented. This was the first human birth in history. No one had ever been through this before. She must have experienced herself as being part of a miracle beyond imagining.

Eve saw clearly, perhaps, the breathtaking implications of her experience. Until now, there was only one Creator in the world. He alone was responsible for the existence of everything, from moon and stars to grass and trees, elephants and zebras, sky and earth. But all that changed now. Now, God had taken a partner and had ushered her into the great secret of Creation. That partner was Eve.

"I have acquired a man with God!" Eve cries exultantly. Look what G-d and I have done. We have created this little man together! Yes, of course, Adam was involved too, but his piece was relatively incidental. A moment and it was all over. Eve carried the child and brought it successfully into the world. I have become a partner with the Divine in the very secret of the Universe. I have shared with him the sweet taste of Creation.

Moshe and the Tomato Plant

We are now, I think, in a position to see a deeper, more vibrant, link between Cain's name and his profession. It is not just that both of these revolve around land. Rather both Cain's name and his profession speak to one of the most intoxicating pursuits that we as human beings can hope to be engaged in. Each speaks to the possibility of becoming a partner with God in the act of creation.

Think about it: What's the big deal about being a farmer? Yes, you get the obvious utilitarian benefits. You can get food by raising crops. Plus you remain connected to land, you remain "grounded," as we suggested before. But there is something more. There is a great joy to be found in farming. A joy that many of us moderns have become too jaded to see.

In our world, we are used to seeing fruits and vegetables as mere things. We either consume them at our table, if we care about nutrition, or we trade them on the commodities exchange, if we care about our pocketbook. Tomatoes, as any good city-child will tell you, come from the supermarket, not from the ground. But there is another story that fruits and vegetables tell, and it is a story that can leave us awe-struck. We can still access that wonder if we try.

I personally discovered that wonder through my child. It sounds ridiculous to say it now, but when my son Moshe was maybe three or four year old, I used to regale him at bedtime with stories about him and his imaginary friend, his ceiling fan. Yes, "Moshe and the Fan" had all sorts of adventures together.

There were the usual cops and robbers tales of course, but the story that really captured my son's attention was the one about the tomato garden. It goes like this:
Once upon a time, Moshe took some little seeds from a pouch and sprinkled them on the ground. "What are you doing?" asked his trusty fan. Moshe explained that he was planting tomatoes. "Don't be ridiculous," said the fan, "those aren't tomatoes. Those are little tiny crumbs. And why are you wasting them by putting them on the ground?" Moshe told his fan to be patient, and went to fetch his shovel. "Why are you burying those things?" shrieked the fan, "Now you're really ruining them!" But the fan had seen nothing yet. Soon, Moshe started dumping water on the ground with his bucket. "You're drowning everything and just making a muddy mess," said the fan, "Let's go home."

But Moshe would not be deterred. He patiently explained to his friend that he was planting seeds; that these would soon grow into green, leafy plants, and that these plants, in turn, would soon give him lots of tomatoes. The fan couldn't contain his laughter. He thought Moshe had lost his mind.

Every day, Moshe would drag his chortling fan back to the same spot in the backyard and would look to see if his plants were growing. And every day, the fan would make fun of him. "This planting thing is ridiculous," chided the fan, "When are you going to outgrow these childhood notions?"

Well, you know what happens next. One day, as Moshe was dejectedly walking back from his plot of land, he turned around for one last peek. "There!" he shouted, "Do you see that little green shoot? That's my plant!" And sure enough, there it was. The tomato plant continued to grow, and suffice it to say that, by the time bedtime was over, a vindicated Moshe and his no-longer-skeptical fan were delighting in a feast of newly harvested tomatoes.

Every time I would tell this story, my four year old son would be enthralled. It was just the most fabulous tale in the world to him. He wanted to hear it over and over. And he wanted to start planting his own tomatoes.

Living the Dream of Eve

Children aren't dumb. One of the big differences between us and them is that we've seen the world more than they have. Often, that translates into valuable life experience -- but sometimes, it just means we're more jaded than they are. In the case of Moshe and his tomato plant, I am convinced that it is the child's unabashed wonder and joy that is the more genuine human response to the saga of the tomato plant. A little child knows to pay homage to its spectacular journey from seed to stalk. A grown-up's failure to stand in awe at the tomatoes he puts in his supermarket bag is not, by comparison, anything to be proud of.

So Cain chooses to be a farmer. A strange coincidence wouldn't you say? Eve exclaims that she has become a partner with God in creating new life. And then, Cain, her son, chooses his own path to that same thrilling goal. He is not a woman. He cannot bear fruit of the womb. But he can do the next best thing. He can cultivate the fruit of the land. He can do through land what Eve does through her body. He can place a seed in that which is fertile, and become a partner with the Divine in the wondrous unfolding of life.

Cain's name and his profession both point to the intoxicating wonder of the tomato plant. Eve's jubilant exclamation is the seed of Cain's name, and Cain, in turn, devotes his life to planting seeds -- seeds which carry forth his mother's dream, bringing it to fruition in the new dimension of agriculture.

Our quest to understand Cain though, is not over yet. For all of this, somehow, must be relevant to the rest of the story; to jealousy, to offerings and to murder. In order for us to see how, we need to look a little more carefully at Eve's exclamation of wonder. For in fact, there is something just a little bit odd about what she is saying. Instead of exclaiming, as we might have expected, that she has "created," barati, a little man with God, or that she has "formed," yatzarti, a little man with God, she says something else entirely. She says kaniti... that she has "acquired" a man with God.

What does she mean by such strange words? The odd part of her declaration cannot be dismissed as incidental -- for it is precisely that odd part of what she says that is the genesis of Cain's name: Kayin is named for her word kaniti -- I have acquired.

Eve was trying to say something more. And that thought, whatever it was, found living expression in her son. Now we just have to figure out what it was.

I Kayin is actually an anagram formed from the first three letters of kaniti. "Kuf", "Nun," "Yud" is transposed, and becomes "Kuf", "Yud", "Nun".
So Cain derives his name from his mother's declaration that she has "acquired" a man with God. As we mentioned in the previous article, Eve's use of the word "acquire" is a bit odd. But truth to tell, this is not the only oddity in Eve's declaration. Something else is a bit strange as well. It has to do with the way Eve says that she has partnered with God.

If you were a Hebrew speaker and you wanted to say that you had done something "with" someone else, how would you say it? Which Hebrew word would you choose for "with"?

The word you would immediately, instinctively reach for would be im. You can grab your dictionary and look it up. The word im appears everywhere in the Bible, and it is the most basic and plain way to say with.

But this is not the word Eve uses. She uses the word et.

Et too, is a common word in the Bible. And et can mean "with" -- at least occasionally. Nine times out of ten, though, et means something else entirely. It performs a particular grammatical function that would be entirely out of place in Eve's sentence. We'll talk more about what et usually means later, but for now, suffice it to say that Eve avoids the far more common word for with, (im), and uses the much more jarring, seemingly-out-of-place et instead. Why would she do that?

**From Creator to Owner**

Well, first things first. Eve talks about "acquiring" rather than "creating." Is there a relationship between the two words -- that is, the word we would have expected her to use (create) and the word she actually uses (acquire)?

Clearly, the words are related. "Acquiring" conjures up notions of having or owning, and indeed, a creator could be said to have or own the things he creates. He might be said to "acquire" them through the act of creating them. So creation, we might say, leads to ownership.

Right?

Well sort of, but not necessarily. Creation can lead to ownership -- but it doesn't have to. Let's stop and define our terms here. When I say that I own something, this means that I am asserting my right to control the thing and to keep you from using it. Now, after I make something, I can decide to assert this right if I want to, but I don't have to. I could alternatively decide that what I've made is open to the world and people can use it freely or alter it at will. If I make a software program, I can file a patent and assert my exclusive rights over it; or I can make it freeware. It is up to me.

The act of creation then, sets up a choice. The choice concerns my relationship to that which I've created. Will I choose to assert my control over it? Will I choose to own it?

Eve, at least in her own mind, seems to have made this journey from "creator" to "acquirer" -- she, along with God, has "acquired" this little man. Which leads us to ask: Why, exactly, would a creator choose to make this journey?

**When It's Not About Money Anymore**

The most obvious children come to mind -- and unless Eve was intending to put Cain up for sale on the slave market, it's doubtful that it is financial gain she has in mind motivation for a creator to assert his rights of ownership, I suppose, would be economic. If I own something, I can sell it or trade it for other things of value. But there are certain things which are "ours" that we don't own in an economic kind of way -- when she calls Cain "hers." Indeed, the lure of cash does not by any means exhaust the list of reasons I might want to "own" that which I create. Stephen King has a lot of money already, maybe more than he can use, but he still fills out the copyright forms for his books. Why?

A deeper reason a creator wishes to exert ownership, I think, is a sense of pride in that which he's made. By this, I don't mean pride in a bad sense, I mean it in a natural sense. What I've made is an expression of who I am. It is precious to me. I poured resources, energy and ingenuity into its making, and I want to make sure the thing maintains its integrity once it is released into the world at large.

To clarify the point: Calling myself the owner of that which I've made is not necessarily a selfish act. I may well be ready to part with what I've made, to bestow it as a gift to others or to the world -- but still, I want to make sure the world gets what I intended to give it. I don't want my precious creation to be adulterated or corrupted by other well-meaning but foolish hands. Sometimes I assert that what I've made is mine merely in order to protect what I think is its core identity.

Speaking personally, I can certainly relate to the impulse of a "creator" to see himself as an "owner." A number of years ago, I was asked by a local organization to develop a series of classes on "the Meaning of Life" according to Judaism. It seemed like a hopelessly vague and probably fruitless assignment. But after many days and weeks of work, I had finally put together something that, well, I really liked. I was truly proud of this thing. And all of a sudden, I felt terribly reluctant to do what I had said I would do. I was supposed to teach the course to a number of teachers, who would then go out and teach it to students. But I didn't want to do that anymore. I feared that the organization that commissioned the project didn't really understand what I had put together, and I worried that the delicate tapestry I had constructed would become corrupted in the hands of others who didn't care about it as much.
as I did. I can't say I'm proud of feeling this way, but, for better or for worse, I just wasn't prepared to give up control over what I had made. It was too dear to me.

In using the word "acquire" rather than "create," perhaps Eve was making some sort of journey from creator to owner. Not an "owner" in a base, economic sense, but in a fuller, even spiritual sense. What she created with God was not something trivial or incidental, but something which imbued her life with new sanctity and meaning. Indeed, Eve's very name speaks to this life-goal: Eve, or in Hebrew Chava, is short for em kol chai, "Mother of All Life." The fruits of her partnership with the Almighty are not incidental to who she is; they help define who she is. Her child would be hers and God's, come what may. Cain mattered to her, in the deepest possible way.

**From Im to Et**

But to truly understand Eve, we must now turn to the next ambiguous phrase in her declaration, her use of the unusual "et" instead of "im."

As I mentioned above, *et* can be used to mean *with* (as Eve seems to use it here), but that is not the usual dominant meaning of the word. What, in fact, does *et* usually mean?

Before I answer that, let me take a minute to make my case as to why it's even important for us to know this. Why should we be so concerned with the other meaning of *et* if that's not the meaning that Eve intends?

The answer is this: When it comes to Hebrew, synonyms (like, for example, *et* and *im*, both of which can mean *with*) are a tricky business. You always have to ask why there are two words for an idea when one would have worked just fine. More often than not, the two synonymous words don't mean exactly the same thing; they are instead slightly different flavors of the same ice cream. We can see another example of this with the words *eiphoh* and *ayeh* in connection with Adam and Eve in Eden. These two words, which each ostensibly means *where*, actually signify two very different questions: "where" vs. "where have you gone." Likewise, when it comes to *with*, if there are two Hebrew words for this idea, it may well be that the idea itself comes in two different flavors.

How do you discern the taste of each flavor, the precise meaning of each term? One way to do it is to look for alternative meanings of each word. If *et* has a primary meaning and a secondary meaning, it may well be that the secondary meaning derives from the primary one. The kind of *with* that *et* expresses may be influenced by whatever else this word *et* really means.

**Getting at "Et"**

So now, back to our question: What does *et* usually mean, when it doesn't mean *with*?

Well I'm glad you asked. The question though, isn't so easy to answer, for the primary meaning of the word *et* has no English counterpart. It is a grammatical utility tool unique to the Hebrew language. It provides a bridge, a link, between a verb and a direct object. In English, we don't have a need for any special words to perform this task. We just put the verb and direct object right next to each other and call it a day. In Hebrew though, *et* would be inserted between the two to complete the link.

Here's a quick example. In English, if you struck a little round thing, you would say, "I hit the ball," and it would be clear to all what you mean. In Hebrew though, you wouldn't say it that way. You would use the word *et* to create the link between verb and object. You would say *hikeiti et hakadur* -- or, "I hit 'et* the ball."

So let me be the first to congratulate you -- you are now an expert in Hebrew grammar, and there there, it wasn't even so painful, was it? But the real prize is that you are now in a better position to understand the Bible. For now that you know what *et* usually means, you can now see what it might have meant when Eve used it to mean *with*.

**Co-Subject or Tool?**

In English, as in Hebrew, the word *with* admits of two meanings. I can say that I wrote this article with a co-author (I didn't). Or I can say I wrote it with a word-processor (I did). In each case, I am using the same word *with* -- but I mean vastly different things.

- One kind of *with* denotes full companionship; the other denotes subservience.

- One kind of *with* indicates an equal partnership; the other, an unequal partnership.

One kind of *with*, I would argue, is denoted by *im*. The other kind, I think, is denoted by *et*.

The *im* kind of *with* points to a co-subject -- another author, for example, who along with me, plans, plots and writes the article. The *et* kind of *with* though, doesn't point to another subject at all. It points to an object -- a tool that I make use of to achieve my goal.
"Im" versus "Et"

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"Im" kind of "with" "Et" kind of "with"

In a curious kind of way, perhaps the two meanings of *et* really *are* the same. *Et*, when used as a grammatical linker, points to an object in a sentence. And *et*, when used to mean *with*, points to an object, too. It indicates that which a subject uses to get something done.

So now, one more time -- when Eve said "I acquired a man with God," what was she really saying?

The two halves of Eve's marvelously concise statement mesh to form a fascinating whole. Eve perceives herself a partner with the Almighty in the sacred and miraculous act of creation. The fruit of this partnership matters to her, means everything to her; she has acquired, not merely created, and the product of this creativity expresses the essence of who she is. And yet this is not a partnership of equals. One partner is subject; the other is object. One is innovator, the other a tool.

There is something inherently unsettled about this arrangement, and something inherently ambiguous about what Eve is saying. Hang on, dear reader, and we'll try to get to that -- as well as its ramifications for understanding Cain -- in our next article.

I Indeed, the very word "matter" may well derive from the Latin word for mother, "mater".

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**Creator or Owner: The World's First Murder, Part 7**

What happens when something you make means so much to you that you view the wondrous creation as an expression of your deepest self?

The year is 1879; the place, Menlo Park, New Jersey.

You are a glassblower. But it is a mere job, you are quite sure -- not a life's calling.

Orphaned at a young age you dropped out of high school to take over your father's glassworks shop. Since then you've reliably provided for your mother and sisters, and you are proud of that. But sometimes late at night, you lie awake. You've never quite shaken off the urge to be a part of something larger than this.

During the years you've spent in your humble shop the realms of industry and technology have exploded with innovation. The telegraph came into being just a few years ago, and the world will never be the same. Things which seemed the stuff of science fiction are becoming a reality. It is all happening in your lifetime. You would give anything to be a part of it.

Alas though, fate and fortune had other plans. Day after day, you ply your trade, and customers come and go. But one day, something curious happens. A man comes into your shop who has an unusually keen interest in the work you are doing. He looks at the delicate balls of hollow glass you've constructed, and he compliments you on your skill. Then he tips his hat and leaves.
Behold, the Bush Was Ablaze, but it Was Not Being Consumed

One night about a month later you are walking home from work when something catches your eye. All the houses are dark, save one. At the far end of the block, a light emanates from a living room window. You walk on by to investigate the possible danger -- perhaps a candle has been left burning unintentionally -- and are startled to find that the source of the light is not a candle at all. Instead, there is a man hunched over a glowing ember, enclosed in glass. The ember is white hot; its shine is terrifyingly bright, but strangely, it doesn't seem to be burning...

Suddenly the ember flares and the man recoils. The glass shatters and the house is plunged into smoky darkness. You hurry away, but in the glare of the ember you caught a glimpse of the man's face. It was that fellow you met in your shop a month ago.

That night, you can't stop thinking about the strange light. A voice inside you tells you that something momentous is afoot. You feel that somehow, on the sleepy streets of Menlo Park, the world is about to change forever.

You throw off the covers, pull on a bathrobe, and hurry down the street to that house. The man opens the door and greets you with a smile. "I've been waiting for you," he tells you with a wink. "I could use the services of a good glassblower."

At three in the morning that cold December night Thomas Edison tells you everything. You hear about his quest to harness electricity to create a lasting, reliable form of illumination. For the first time, he tells you, people will have the benefit of light without the aid of the sun or a flame. He shows you his sketches and his calculations. He is almost ready to unveil his invention. But he is missing just one thing. That is why, he says, it was so fortunate that you showed up at his house this evening.

For Edison's new "light bulb" to actually work, the ember -- or the filament, as he called it -- needs to be encased in a complete vacuum. There can't be any air whatsoever in the inner chamber, or the filament will ignite and the device will explode. He needs, he tells you, the services of a good glassblower; someone who can create a hollow ball of glass filled with a perfect vacuum.

You tell him you can do it, that he's come to the right man. You've been making glass ornaments all your life, and it's not so hard to suck the air out of the sphere as you seal it. You return to his shop the next evening, and you easily encase his contraption in the clear, sealed chamber he had been looking for. The seconds turn to minutes, and minutes to hours. The light continues to shine. You and Edison had done it.

Days later you both invite the entire neighborhood to Edison's makeshift garage laboratory. You and he have rigged it from end to end with wires and with these new-fangled "light-bulbs." It's a moonless night and the sky is black, but with one flick of the switch, all that changes. The entire laboratory is illuminated with the light of a hundred tiny suns. The men and women who have come to watch erupt in spontaneous applause.

Your dream has come true before your eyes. The age of the incandescent light-bulb has dawned, and you, the humble glassblower from a small New Jersey hamlet, have been a part of it. What more could you ask for?

The Danger of the Dream

The story seems to be a happy one. But it won't necessarily end that way. Troubled waters may lie just below the surface of this idyllic little scene.

The trouble begins with this:

Your partnership with Mr. Edison may have started with a chance encounter, but it is not a trivial opportunity. Its possibilities touch the core of who you are and what you want to be. Glassblowing is all very nice, but you don't think that's what your life is truly about. What's really made your stay on earth meaningful, you feel, is this great opportunity to create on a grand scale -- this chance to boldly seize nature by the throat and make something new out of it; to harness the fearsome power of lightning in a little glass ball and transform men's lives forever.

Now, stand back for a moment and consider this:

What happens when something you make means so much to you that you view the wondrous creation as an expression of your deepest self, that you feel a need to assiduously safeguard it; that you see yourself not merely as its "creator" but as its "acquirer," as its rightful owner?

On one hand, there is nothing evil or malevolent about making this jump from "creator" to "owner." But it creates certain challenges. Especially when that which one cherishes was not made by him alone, but was made in partnership with someone else.

Who's Who?

The first great challenge one faces, it seems to me, is whether one will see this partnership for what it truly is, not just how one might wish it would be.

Let's talk about you, the glassblower, and Mr. Edison. Who is the major partner in this endeavor, and who is the minor partner?
Well, let's see. Edison came up with the idea, sketched out the plans, did the calculations, spotted the pitfalls, planned how to correct them, and designed the first working model of the light-bulb. And you were the glassblower who filled an order for a ball of glass with nothing inside.

It seems pretty clear that you are the minor partner. But that's not necessarily how you would choose to see it. It is a difficult thing to be the junior partner in your life's dream. And in any case, there is another way to look at things:

*It's been five years since my first, fateful meeting with Edison. As I'm leaving the office one day, I glance behind me at the words emblazoned across the entry way to our new corporate headquarters, "Edison & Fohrman Electric Works." And for the first time, I feel vaguely uneasy.*

*How come it has to be "Edison & Fohrman Electric Works?" I wonder to myself. Why sure, the sign guys had to put one of our names first, and "E" does come before "F" if we follow alphabetical order -- but really now, couldn't it just have easily have said "Fohrman & Edison Electric Works?" I mean, let's face it. Thomas is a nice guy and all, and far be it from me to actually bring this up with him, but, you know, he'd never be anywhere without a good glassblower like me in his life. Why, he'd still be out there in his garage with all those exploding light bulbs going off all around him. Sure, he came up with all the plans, but it is one thing to think of things, it's another to put them into practice. You know, I really should talk to those sign guys about reversing those names...*

**Eve and Cain**

Eve's exclamation in the wake of her delivery of mankind's first child may well have been an attempt to grapple with this very dilemma. How does one balance the burning passion to create new life, the sense that one's destiny and reason for living is bound up with this mind-boggling ability to create a new man, with the reality that one is the junior partner in this enterprise?

Eve declares that she has "acquired" a little man with God -- *kaniti ish et Hashem*. As we noted in the last article, the word *et* seems to convey the kind of *Iwith* that normally signifies an unequal partnership; a partnership of subject and object, of actor and tool. But the precise meaning of Eve's phrase is difficult and elusive. Who, exactly, is the actor, and who is the tool?

Does she mean that God is the primary partner and she, the vehicle by which the child came to be, is secondary? This would certainly seem to reflect the reality of the situation. God is the architect of the system of reproduction; He designed it, and He alone stands behind its intricate biochemistry. Eve brings this design into the world in a *practical* sense; she is the glassblower, as it were, providing a vehicle through which the Almighty's artistry can find its physical expression.

Perhaps this, indeed, is what Eve means. From a translation standpoint, there is reason to believe this is so. The word *et*, when used to mean *with*, may well mean "*along with*" -- as in "I went shopping *along with you." Here, I am clearly secondary to you; the sense of the phrase is that I am tagging along with you. Something like this, for example, seems to be what the Bible has in mind when it says that Joseph was shepherding *et* his brothers (*Genesis, 37:2*). Joseph was shepherding *along with* them; he was tagging along, as it were. Similarly, Eve may mean that she has created this little man *along with* God, the primary creator.

But it may not be so simple. As a matter of fact, even in the case of Joseph, it may not be so simple. Look again at that verse about Joseph and his brothers, and this time, let's see the words in their larger context:

*Joseph was seventeen years old, and he was shepherding "et" his brothers through sheep...and he brought back bad reports [about his brothers] to his father. (Genesis 37:2)*

There is something incongruous in that sentence. What is it supposed to mean that Joseph was shepherding along with his brothers through sheep? Yes, you heard right, that is in fact what the Hebrew says. The Hebrew prefix "*et,*" placed here before the word "sheep," signifies either *through, with, concerning* or some other similar preposition. None of these words easily make sense in the verse, and indeed, the phrase "shepherding *through* sheep" appears nowhere else in the entire Five Books of Moses.

The verse, I think, seems to suggest a secondary level of meaning. On the one hand, yes, Joseph is shepherding *along with* his brothers, and what they are shepherding is sheep. But on another level, what Joseph is really tending is not sheep at all. He is *tending his brothers* -- and he is doing it *through the medium of sheep.*

Let me explain. Think about what Joseph is really doing in this verse. He is using the opportunity of shared work-time with his brothers to bring back reports about his brothers to their father. Thus, while ostensibly shepherding *with* his brothers, he is in fact tending *them* -- using sheep in order to do so. The brothers are more like the direct object of Joseph's shepherding than co-subjects along with Joseph.

When it comes to Eve, a similar kind of double meaning may lie in the verse. On the one hand, Eve declares that she has created this child *along with* God. But recall that God appears after the word *et,* in a spot usually reserved for a direct object. Perhaps a secondary meaning whispers something else: That Eve has "acquired" this child, and that God, her partner in this act, has been the means through which she has been able to do so. She has used the services of God to bring about her dream.

The difference between one meaning and another is subtle. But it is not inconsequential. For while meaning A and meaning B may seem very close, it may be that the discrepancy between them becomes fully recognizable only in the next generation -- in the hands of the man named for Eve's word "acquire," in
the hands of Kayin/Cain. Indeed, how Fohrmn views Edison is not just an issue of attitude and perspective. It also influences how I act towards Edison. It influences the kind of gifts I might choose to give him.

And therein, I believe, lies the key to understanding the mystery of Cain's rejected offering.

Cain Buys Insurance: The World's First Murder, Part 8

What can you give to someone who has everything? The gift of gratitude is always appreciated.

There is a great theological question that the story of Cain and Abel, the story of mankind's first offerings, raises. It is this: Does God really need these offerings, or any offerings for that matter? Is God some sort of cosmic carnivore, satiated by the taste of meat rising from the altar? Is it conceivable that the Master of the Universe, the Creator of all Life, would need man's sacrifice of animal or plant life to keep Him happy? It seems an insult to our concept of the Creator to assume that this is so.

To some extent, we dealt with this question, at least implicitly, in the first two articles in this series. However, I'd like you to keep this question in the back of your mind, as we proceed to wrap up our look at the glassblower and his friend, Mr. Edison.

Edison and the Glassblower - Redux

It's been almost a year since the incorporation of Fohrmn and Edison Electric Works. Thomas and I are busy planning our gala, first anniversary party, to which virtually the whole town will be invited. It occurs to me that this would be a good time for me to give my partner, Thomas, a gift...

I suggested to you earlier that the glassblower who assisted Edison in creating the light bulb has a fateful choice to make. Will he have the courage to see himself as he really is -- as the junior partner in the venture -- or will he invert that reality, fancying himself the primary innovator, with his friend, Thomas, a mere apprentice.

But it is not just a matter of how the glassblower will think about Edison. It is also a matter of how he will act towards him. For when Fohrmn the Glassblower decides that he really should give a gift to his partner Thomas, what is he really thinking?

There are two possibilities.

When Prudence in Not a Virtue

One motivation the glassblower might have for his gift is pure gratitude.

If the glassblower is emotionally courageous, if he is able to come to grips with the reality of his relationship with Edison, he will be able to recognize the overwhelming debt he owes to his friend, and he will want to find a way to express that recognition to him:

Through Edison, I have had a hand in one of the greatest inventions of all time; I have risen beyond my wildest hopes to become a part of history. I am eternally grateful to Edison for allowing me to have a small part in all this. I owe the world to him. I have to find some way to express this to him...

But this is not the only motivation our glassblower might have.

What if it is simply too painful for him to recognize that he is but a junior partner in his life's dream? What if, instead of facing this truth head-on, our glassblower chooses to invert reality, and adopt the fantasy that he, not Edison, is the primary partner in the venture?

In such case, he may choose to think that he is not really indebted to Edison; he may choose to believe that, if anything, Edison is indebted to him.

This doesn't mean our friend the glassblower is going to nix the idea of giving Edison a gift. It just means that there's a different motive behind the gift. Indeed whatever the glassblower tells himself, in the back of his mind, he knows that he needs Edison, and that he must at all costs preserve his relationship with him:
This second kind of gift is very different than the first. It is not really about gratitude; it is about insurance. It is not so much an expression of personal feelings as it is a concession to business necessities. There are costs to doing business, and one of those costs is keeping the people that you need happy.

These differences in motivation begin in the mental realm, in the private realm of the giver's mind. But these differences don't stay private for long. They invariably express themselves in the nature of the gift one chooses to give.

A person expressing a profound sense of gratitude gives the best he can. A person buying an insurance policy is looking for a reasonable deal.

If the Almighty Has No Needs, How Can I Give Him Anything?

Let's come back to the question we raised at the beginning of this article: Does God really need what we are trying to give Him? The answer, I think, is that an offering, in its genuine religious sense, is not an attempt to fulfill the "needs" of God. The Almighty doesn't have any needs -- that, indeed, is why they call Him "all-mighty." The false premise at the heart of the problem is the notion that I have to be fulfilling some need of yours if I am giving something to you. That's wrong. There are other reasons to give gifts. One of them is something we call "gratitude."

Gratitude has very little to do with a recipient's "needs." As such, it is not crucial that gifts of gratitude be expensive or overly abundant. But it is important that one gives his best. The gift might be as simple as a single rose picked from your garden; but it will be the best of those roses. Anything less than that, falls to say what you want it to say.

A month or two ago, a student of mine called me to discuss a gift that the class was planning to give me. Usually such end-of-year gifts are meant to be surprises, but this student broke the rules and figured that he, on behalf of the class, would just plain and simple ask me what I wanted. He made an interesting stipulation though. My laptop had been stolen the week before and he remarked, "Frankly, we could just give you a gift certificate to Best Buy to help you buy another laptop -- but we know that you'll get that for yourself one way or the other. We want to give you something special. How about a gift certificate for a gourmet dinner, and tickets for you and your wife to attend this great new play that's coming to town?"

When a gift is meant to express gratitude, it's not really about fulfilling the needs of the recipient. The thing I needed most was a new laptop. But, unlucky for me, that was besides the point. The gift needed to be special, and a laptop was simply too pedestrian to qualify. Strangely, but perhaps appropriately, the "special-ness" of the gift -- at least in the mind of this student -- seemed to have an inverse relationship to how much I needed it. Instead, "only the finest" -- the gourmet meal and tickets to the play -- would do.

Expressions of gratitude such as these can help build relationships. Ironically though, not all gifts are so constructive. When a gift masquerades as gratitude but is really a glorified insurance policy, it doesn't help our relationship with the recipient one little bit, and here, perhaps, lies the key to our story.

God and the Heavenly Cookie Jar

Let's recall that Cain derives his name, Kayin, from his mother Eve's declaration of awe at his birth. And not coincidentally, Cain, through farming, actualizes his name. He, like his mother before him, devotes himself to the thrilling creation of new life - seedlings -- in partnership with God. Yet Cain, in offering a gift to his Divine partner, chooses to give something that is merely average. Why would he do that?

Is Cain giving a free-flowing gift of unmitigated gratitude, or a calculated bargaining chip? Is it about "what can I give" or "how much can I afford?"

Remember: There was a potentially dark side to Eve's declaration. She was not just "creator" but "acquirer", and in her exalted partnership with God, it was not entirely clear who was the vehicle for whose creativity. Eve's challenge, perhaps, compounds itself when it comes to the next generation -- her son Cain. If Eve's challenge was to think with integrity, to maintain cognizance of her role as junior partner with the Divine, maybe her son's challenge was to act with integrity -- to relate to the Almighty from a position of gratitude, not bribery. And perhaps it was here that he failed.

Beyond Logic

If this was the root of Cain's failure, his behavior was certainly understandable -- even logical. Bargaining chips are more "rational" than free-flowing gratitude. After all, God is very powerful. He holds the keys to the Great Heavenly Cookie Jar, and we all want what's in that jar. But if we are not careful, the need to get those things can loom larger and larger, until this need crowds everything else out.

Ultimately, when the gift you give is little more than a spiritual insurance policy to make sure you get what you want from God, you may, ironically, be creating distance with that gift, not closeness. The nature of this distance is something we have yet to fully explore. But for now, suffice it to say that when a recipient refuses such a gift, what he is really saying is -- try again; you're not in the insurance business. This isn't what our relationship is meant to be about...
We are now, perhaps, in a position to understand something we first saw a while back -- the mysterious links between our story and the Eden narrative. That, though, will have to wait for another article.

The Blame Game: The World's First Murder, Part 9

Cain thinks his problems are because of other people's choices, even God's.

Just before Cain goes for that fateful stroll in the fields with his brother the Almighty speaks to him. This is what He says:

  Why are you angry and why has your face fallen? Is it not the case that if you do well -- lift up! And if you do not do well -- sin lies crouching at the door, its desire is unto you, and you can rule over it. (Genesis 4:6-7)

What do these rather cryptic words really mean? And, whatever they in fact mean, why is it that Cain needs to hear them right now?

Beyond Brownie Points

A cursory glance at the words might lead you to believe that God's speech is sort of a standard-issue religious exhortation to be a better person -- something along the lines of, "You better be nice! If you are, God will reward you. But if you're mean, He'll punish you."

And while some Divine nudging to Cain that he "better shape up or else" would not seem entirely out of place here, a closer look at God's words suggests that something slightly more complex is going on.

To be more specific: Yes, God does talk about two alternatives that lay before Cain, a sort of fork in the road wherein he can choose either good or its opposite. But I would argue that what God says next is enigmatic, and has little in common with conventional brownie points verus fire-and-brimstone style thinking.

First off, the Lord never suggests that Cain will be "rewarded" for good conduct. The text says something else entirely: That if Cain "does well," then, "lift up!"

Now, what precisely this means is a very good question -- we'll get back to it -- but it doesn't sound like God is promising Cain some sort of tangible reward for doing the right thing. Something else is going on.

Let's proceed a bit further: What exactly is to happen to Cain if he chooses the other path, if he doesn't "do well?" You might have expected God to speak about punishments here -- if not full-fledged warnings of fire and brimstone, then at least the rough equivalent of confiscating Cain's ten-speed for a week. Instead though, God says something tantalizing, but a bit confusing, "if you do not do well, sin lies crouching at the door."

Now what exactly does that mean? Whatever it means, it doesn't sound like God is imposing a punishment. If anything, it sounds like God is saying that Cain, by choosing evil, will become vulnerable, somehow, to sin. Sin will be like a crouching lion, ready to pounce and overcome him.

But that idea is itself puzzling. For if Cain chooses evil -- well, that itself is a sin, isn't it? So why say that as a consequence, Cain becomes vulnerable to sin? The verse seems to have it backwards, no?

Talking Cain Off the Bridge

So we have some difficulties with understanding God's words here, and we'll get back to these issues -- but in the meantime, let's not lose the forest in the trees. Let's step back for a moment and try to take a larger perspective. Let's ask ourselves: Bottom line, what seems to be the overall message of the speech? What is the general tone of the Almighty's words? What is He "more or less" saying?

Well, given the placement of this speech -- it comes a sentence before Cain murders his brother -- it seems logical that the Lord may have been trying to "talk Cain off the bridge," as it were. The Almighty was surely aware of the dark deeds of which Cain was capable. Perhaps the speech was a last attempt to shake Cain into seeing a different view of reality, into seeing an alternative course of action besides the dark path that lay ominously before him.

But if the speech is an attempt to "talk Cain off the bridge," God's tactics seem puzzling. The verse tells us that Cain was angry and he was crestfallen. Well, if someone you knew was angry and crestfallen, and you were trying to get them to reconsider some kind of disastrous, irreversible step they were about to take, how would you go about it? What kind of tone would you adopt?
Speaking for myself, I would probably try to sound empathetic and reassuring. *It's OK, I understand how you feel, it must be hard,* something along these lines. But that is hardly the tone of God's speech. Instead, God forcefully challenges Cain. As a matter of fact, He goes so far as to question Cain's right to feel the way he does, "*Why are you angry and why has your face fallen?"*

When I was growing up, I was often told, "*You can't help how you feel; but you can help what you do about it.*" If you feel angry, fine; but, you don't have to act on that anger. In the words of His speech, though, the Almighty seems to take issue with that advice. Apparently, Cain can help how he feels about it. Cain is crestfallen and he is angry -- but he shouldn't be. His perspective needs to change.

Why is it so vital that Cain abandon his current set of feelings? Because, I think, those feelings indicate something. They indicate that Cain has misinterpreted what has gone on between himself and God. And only by correcting his view of the situation, will Cain be able to steer himself away from a course that leads straight to murder.

To explain:

**How Do You Change Your Feelings?**

Anger and depression make good bed-fellows; they often go together. The reason, perhaps, is that each is basically a passive emotional response. Anger and depression take for granted that the source of our woes is located outside ourselves; that we have been betrayed by others, or have been victimized by forces beyond our control. And while this may sometimes be the case, it is often an exaggeration. More often than not, we do have choices available to us, even if we are not always prepared to recognize them. Once we see this, our anger and depression begin to evaporate.

Harriett Lerner, in her book, *The Dance of Anger,* paints a hypothetical scenario that nicely illustrates the point. Imagine that you and your roommate have a pet kitten. One night, the kitten wakes you with some strange meowing. It is two-thirty in the morning and you are concerned. You turn to your roommate, and a conversation ensures between the two of you that goes roughly like this:

*You: "She really doesn't sound right. I think we should call the vet."*

*Your Roommate: "What do you mean call the vet? It's the middle of the night!"

*You: "I don't know. She really sounds pretty bad. I think we should call the vet..."

*Your Roommate: "Look, just go back to sleep. She probably swallowed a hairball."

*You: "Are you sure we just shouldn't call the vet?"

*Your Roommate: "Goodnight!"

You both go back to sleep, and when you wake up in the morning, the cat is dead.

Now, take a deep breath and ask yourself: How are you going to feel towards your roommate, when morning comes and you discover the lifeless kitten lying next to your bed?

You are likely to be enraged.

"It's all your fault! Here I was, telling you that we should take the kitten to the vet, and all you could think about was getting a good night's sleep! And now, the kitten is dead..."

Whether you like it or not, though, the reality is otherwise. You were not the victim of circumstances beyond your control here. You were not betrayed by your sleep-seeking roommate. You had free will. There were choices open to you, choices you refused to grab hold of. No one forced you to get permission from your roommate before calling the vet; you could have made whatever calls you wanted to. If you feel angry or depressed here, it is because you choose to see yourself as helpless, as a victim of your lousy, insensitive roommate. But in fact, you weren't a victim at all.

Cain, in feeling angry, locates the source of his problem outside of himself, in God. No one can control God, and as long as that's the problem, you're nothing but a victim. But that wasn't the reality. The core of his problem lay entirely in the choices Cain was himself making, in the nature of the relationship he was trying to build with God, and this was a realm entirely within his control. The first step off the bridge, then, is letting go and of anger and depression, and reclaiming this element of control.

**The Perils of Neutrality**

So Cain, all in all, is being given an antidote to his feelings of anger and depression. You have choices, God is saying, the ball is in your court. "*If you do well, then, lift up!*" What had been downcast before -- Cain's face ("why has your face fallen...") -- can now be raised. Cain will be able to look himself in
the eye, as it were, when he stares at the mirror in the morning. When we seize on our power to act in a positive way, we begin to lift up our faces again, in
the ultimate gesture of self-respect.

Of course, when there are choices available, there is always the option of choosing poorly, too, "And if you do not do well, sin lies crouching at the door..."

Earlier, we got stuck on this phrase. How could the consequence of sin, be vulnerability to sin? But when the verse talks about "not doing well," who says
that's the same as committing a sin? After all, the text doesn't say "if you do evil," then sin lies crouching at the door; instead, it says "if you do not do
well." Not doing good isn't the same thing as doing evil. It is simply being neutral.

Maybe God is saying something like the following: Why has your face fallen? If you are active: if you seek out the good -- you can lift up your face. And if
you are neutral -- if you do not act positively -- you can't tread water. While being neutral is not itself an evil -- it leaves you vulnerable to evil. Sin lies
crouching at the door, and even the most well intentioned neutral party can still be become its prey.

An interesting speech, we might conclude. And let's even grant, for the moment, that we are right in interpreting it this way. But still, we have yet to
address a nagging question: Why does Cain need to hear this, right now? It's all very nice, these words about neutrality and activism, about vulnerability to
sin. It sure seems like an inspiring thing to put in the Bible somewhere -- say, tucked comfortably in a suitable corner of Deuteronomy. But what is it doing
right here, right now? Beyond the general idea that Cain can act if he chooses to, how are these words about neutrality and vulnerability uniquely relevant
to Cain and to the situation he finds himself in?

Back to Eden

In the coming articles, we'll explore that, and begin to put into place the final pieces of our look at this story. But since I'm in such a great mood just now,
I'm going to leave you with a little tip. A key to understanding all this comes, I think, from some surprising language buried within God's speech.

Earlier in this series, we had noted a striking montage of connections between the Cain and Abel story and mankind's expulsion from Eden. Both Adam
and Cain hear the Divine question, "ayeh?" Both Adam and Cain express fear and hide from God; both Adam and Cain suffer exile, and both are
condemned to experience difficulty in farming.

But the connections between the Cain story and the aftermath of the Tree of Knowledge do not end here. A hidden parallel between Cain and the Eden
narrative lies buried in the text of the speech we have just studied. If you re-read the speech carefully, you'll realize that you have heard its words before.
An entire section of God's speech to Cain is almost a direct quote from something that God had told someone else, not thirty verses earlier.

Of all the Eden connections we have seen thus far, this one is the most shocking and disturbing -- at least when you first see it. If you find the parallel,
you'll know exactly what I'm talking about. But in the mystery of this last Eden connection lies the key, I think, to really understanding what God was
telling Cain in the moments before Abel's murder.

Can Desire be Divorced from Need? The World's First Murder, Part 10

Eve's desire for her husband is not necessarily based on her needs.

I have a favor to ask of you. It is an unusual request, but I have my reasons. Trust me.

The request is this:

If you happen to be flipping through these articles and you opened kind of randomly to this one, you need to promise me that you'll read the whole thing,
all the way to the end. If you can't make that commitment, I am going to ask you to stop right here.

I make this unusual request because what I am about to discuss is both theologically explosive and easily misunderstood. It concerns the Bible's view of
masculinity and femininity and the relationship between them. Many have seen the Bible as a tome written by men seeking to safeguard their patriarchal
power, and seeking to keep the women in their lives subjugated and docile. I do not myself share this view. But if someone with that agenda wanted to find
grist for the mill, he would need look no further than the two verses to which I am about to direct your attention.

It is easy to overlook just how astonishing these two verses are. Each verse on its own seems fairly innocuous. But when you put them together, they are
positively combustible.
In reality I think the verses provide only an excuse, not real evidence, for the charge that the Bible bashes women. But that's why I need you to keep reading past the middle of this article. If you are going to let me show you the explosive part, you owe it to me, and to yourself, to think carefully about what the words really mean. When I've had my say, take some time to think about it, and then you can make up your own mind.

Okay, so we have a deal?

If you're with me this far, I'll assume we do.

A Fearsome Analogy

I mentioned to you earlier that there is one final, parallel to the world of Eden tucked away in the Cain story. It makes its appearance within the lines of God's speech to Cain. Part of this speech has been said before, back in Eden, not thirty verses earlier. Can you find what I am talking about?

Listen to the words of God's speech to Cain carefully. As you do, ask yourself where you have heard these words before.

Why are you angry and why has your face fallen? Is it not the case that if you do well -- lift up! And if you do not do well -- sin lies crouching at the door, its desire is unto you, yet you can rule over it. (Genesis 4:6-7)

The telltale words are the very last ones, "Its desire is unto you, yet you can rule over it." This concluding phrase is lifted almost verbatim from something God said earlier, just after man and his wife ate from the Tree of Knowledge. The original words are troubling enough on their own. But when you take into account their reappearance in the Cain story, they become downright fearsome.

The first time these words appear, God is speaking to Eve. After telling her that she will experience pain in childbirth, He concludes by saying to her, "...your desire will be to your husband, yet he can rule over you" (Genesis 3:16).

You hear the resemblance? God says to Eve that her desire will be to her husband, yet he can rule over her. That's bad enough for us modern types. But then He says to Cain, thirty verses later, that the Evil Inclination's desire is to Cain, yet Cain can rule over it.

Well that just takes the cake doesn't it? I mean, the Bible seems to be suggesting some sort of analogy here. And it's a profoundly disturbing analogy, at that. Those of you who took the SATs to get into college are no doubt familiar with these kinds of analogies. If you add it up, it sounds like Cain is analogous to Adam, and Eve is analogous to -- make sure you are sitting down for this -- Cain's Evil Inclination.

It seems too horrible to believe.

When It's too Good to Be True...

An old adage says that when something seems too good to be true, it usually is. In this case, I think the converse is so as well: When something seems too horrible to believe, it usually is exactly that - not to be believed.

In this vein, I think some healthy skepticism is in order here. Is it really conceivable that the Bible considers Eve, or womankind, tantamount to "sin," the anthropomorphic title given by the verse to Cain's Evil Inclination? Is the Bible viewing femininity as some evil force threatening to overtake the masculine; something he must keep at bay lest it devour him?

Again it seems too horrible to believe. But what then is the Bible trying to say to us with its not so subtle link between one phrase and the other?

OK, just in case you were wondering, this is the part where you're not supposed to stop reading. The fact is that we've committed a subtle, but understandable, logical error in interpreting the analogy. In general, analogies are notoriously easy to misinterpret -- that, after all, is why they put them on the SATs -- and this analogy is no exception. Let's step back, take a deep breath, and try again.

Let's say I tell you that whales desperately need plankton and that cars desperately need gasoline. Both these statements are true, and we might say that an analogy exists between them. But, bear with me here, it does not follow from this that whales are basically the same as cars, or that plankton is pretty much identical to gasoline. Marine biologists would be pretty offended by that conclusion. Rather, what follows is that the relationship between whales and plankton bears similarity to the relationship between cars and gasoline. In each case, the latter provides the fuel that makes the former go.

And so it is with our analogy. When the Bible uses similar language in these two verses, it does not follow that Cain is like Adam, nor does it follow that Eve is like Cain's Evil Inclination. Rather, what follows is that the relationship between Adam and Eve -- or more broadly, between man and woman -- is analogous on some level to the relationship that Cain is asked to develop with his Evil Inclination. And while this might not seem any better than the previous alternative, just hang in there, we're just beginning to see what's going on.

The Four Primal Desires
Over a thousand years ago, the rabbis of the Midrash noticed the analogy we have been wrestling with, and they had something quite intriguing to say about it.

They observed that the word which the Bible uses for desire in each of our two verses is the Hebrew term *teshukah*. While this fact may seem unremarkable in and of itself, they noticed that this word reappears in Scripture a number of times. They traced these various appearances -- beyond Eve and Cain, the word reappears in connection with rain and with God Himself -- and formulated what they saw was a pattern. Here is what they had to say:

*There are four basic 'teshukot' in the world. The teshukah of Eve for Adam, the teshukah of the Evil Inclination for Cain, the teshukah of rain for land, and the teshukah of the Master of the Universe for humanity.* (Bereishis Rabbah 20:7)

Again they cite verses (which I have not reproduced here) to substantiate each one of these conclusions. But look at these four statements carefully. What are the rabbis really saying here?

It seems to me that they are defining the word *teshukah* -- and they are making a sweeping, almost radical, statement in the process. Look carefully at the four examples they give -- the desire of Eve for Adam, of the Evil Inclination for Cain, of rain for land, and of God for humanity -- and see if you can isolate a common denominator between them.

While you are musing about that, you might notice that some of the "desires" which the verse speaks about don't sound much like desires at all. Let's look, for example, at the last two: the desire of rain for land, and the desire of the Almighty for humanity. If you were given the words "rain" and "land", and someone asked you which of these two "desires" the other, what would you say?

I would say land. Land needs rain to nourish its crops; rain doesn't need land at all. And the same holds for God and humanity. A basic tenet of theology states that God is a perfect Being, and that He has no needs at all. So if we are thinking about God and humans -- if anything, it would be humanity that desires God. Why do the sages have it the other way around?

**When Desire is Divorced from Need**

I would argue to you that the sages are defining *teshukah* as something entirely different from what we normally think of when we use the word "desire." When you and I normally talk about desire, we associate desire with "need." Think about the synonyms we use for desire. When I am wanting or needful, I am missing something; when I get it, that hole in my life is filled, and my want or need is satisfied. Usually, when we talk about desire, we are really talking about getting our needs fulfilled.

The question I want you to think about is this: Is that the only kind of desire there is in this world -- or perhaps, is "desire" a larger concept than this? Is there such a thing as a desire that is not based on a sense of need, that doesn't come from some kind of lack that I have? If all my needs and lacks were taken care of, would that be it -- or could I still have some sense of desire?

I think the sages are answering that question with a resounding yes. Yes, it is possible to desire something even when you don't need anything. Rain doesn't need land a whit -- but somehow, it still "desires" land. God doesn't need people a whit either, but somehow, He still desires them. The sages are arguing, I think, that *teshukah* is a code name for this special kind of desire. And it is this very kind of desire, this *teshukah*, that the feminine has for the masculine. And that the Evil Inclination, whatever that is, has for Cain.

What, exactly, is the essential nature of *teshukah*? How do we make sense of a desire that is divorced from need? And how does this shed light on the other two primal *teshukahs* that exist in the world -- the "desire" of the feminine for the masculine and the "desire" of the Evil Inclination for Cain?

**An Overflowing Cup. The World's First Murder, Part 11**

*When you have more than what you need, it is natural to want to give.*

Why did God create the world?

It's not just an idle, philosophical question. From a religious standpoint, this innocent, child-like query packs a big theological wallop. For if God is a perfect Being, a being who has no needs, then why would He bother creating a universe? What could a universe possibly give to a Being who doesn't need anything at all?
In the beginning of the 18th century, a Jewish thinker by the name of Rabbi Moshe Chayim Luzzatto proposed what has become a classic answer to this dilemma. His answer is deceptively simple. Luzzatto says that God created the world in order to be capable of love.

The words seem like a cliché, sort of like the "God is Love" bumper sticker you might see plastered to the back of someone's rusting VW Beetle; but rest assured that Luzzatto lived long before the beatniks, and he meant what he said seriously. His argument goes as follows:

One of the axioms that most religions, Judaism included, accepts about God is that He is good. But those are just words. What does it actually mean to be good? One of the things it means, Luzzatto says, is that one acts to benefit others. If there is no world, though, then there are no others that God can benefit; He exists alone in numinous solitude. God acted to create a world so that there would be other beings existing besides Himself, beings upon whom He could bestow goodness.

In short, God created the world because goodness demanded it.

The Laughing Rabbi

Now for many years, I didn't have the foggiest idea of what Luzzatto was talking about. I had problems with it. Let's leave aside the question of suffering for a moment -- why, in a world created out of love, is there so much hurt and pain? Let's assume that there are answers out there, somewhere, to that. I was troubled by an even more fundamental difficulty. How did Luzzatto solve anything? If God is not supposed to have any needs, then he shouldn't have a "need" to do good, to bestow kindness either. If God has that need it puts us right back to where we started from: How could a perfect Being have needs; how could He be missing something?

I vividly remember making this point once to the dean of the yeshiva where I studied. The dean's name was Rabbi Yaakov Weinberg, may he rest in peace, and I was sitting on a couch in his office, arguing my case as forcefully as I could. I gave an example to illustrate my point. Let's say a woman saves her child from death by throwing herself in front of an oncoming car to shield him. She walks away with injuries, but none as profound as the hurt she would feel had she allowed her child to die. So in the final analysis, she acted out of need, didn't she? I was arguing, really, that there was no such thing as pure altruism, as acting solely for the benefit of others. Every altruistic act expresses a need within the person doing it, and therefore, it is the doer, not just the receiver, who benefits from it.

When I finished making my points, I awaited Rabbi Weinberg's response. As best as I can remember the conversation, he didn't answer me. Instead, he just sat across from me, and then he started laughing. When my attempts to get him to elaborate failed, he finally spoke. "One day," he said, "I would understand," and then, with a good natured nod, he beckoned me to the door. Our meeting was over.

Solving the Case of the Laughing Rabbi

It has taken me a while to understand the meaning of Rabbi Weinberg's laughter. But I think I finally see what he was getting at. He was alluding to the point I left you to ponder at the end of the last article.

We talked earlier about the word teshukah, and suggested that the sages of the Midrash see it as denoting a desire not based upon need. The idea, of course, seems like an oxymoron: All desires seem to come from my not having something I want. But looks are deceiving. There really are radically different desires out there in the world, desires that do not come from a sense of lack whatsoever. Where do they come from, and what makes them tick?

Ironically enough, they come from the very opposite of "need." They come from a sense of fullness. To give an analogy, they express not the desire of the half empty glass to be full, but the desire of a full glass to overflow.

Desires based on fullness are every bit as real as those based on need. In fact, one might argue, they are felt even more intensely than those based on need. Consider the following statement made by the rabbis of the Talmud, "More than the calf wants to suckle, the mother wants to nurse" (Babylonian Talmud, Pesachim 112a).

Both the calf and the mother have desires. The calf is missing something; it needs nutrition from its mother. The mother, on the other hand, "needs" nothing. Nevertheless, it is her desire that is the stronger one. Desires based upon fullness dwarf in passion and intensity mere need-based desires.

The Nature of Love; the Essence of Teaching

To get a better handle on the notion of a "fullness-based" desire, let's talk about an example or two.

What do we mean when we talk about "love?" Different people mean different things. Some people, when they say "I love her," mean, "She fulfills my needs rather nicely." She laughs at my jokes, cooks great meals, and makes me feel comfortable. But love is not just about being fed and feeling understood. On a higher plane, love is not just about what I need, but what I can give. Love means not just that I'm happy you serve my needs, but that I appreciate who you are in and of yourself, independent of what I get from you. When I love in that kind of way my love comes not from lack but from fullness. My affection for you doesn't come solely from your ability to fill the holes in my personality, but from the desire of a mature human being to give what he can to someone he admires and values.
The impulse to teach is another example of this kind of desire. The sages of the Talmud have nasty things to say about people who study their whole lives but never teach others. Why? I'll give you a theory. In Hebrew the verb "to teach," "ilamed, is identical to the verb "to study," "ilmod, except that the latter, "to study," is the intensive form of the verb -- what's known as its piel conjugation. (1) When you stop to think about it, this says something profound about what it means to teach. Teaching is nothing but "studying intensively." When one is so passionate about something he is studying that he can't help but overflow and share what he has discovered with others -- well, that's teaching.

Since teaching is just a further point on a continuum that begins with studying, it follows that when one studies and studies, but never teaches, something is broken inside. Study that never has the potential to flower into teaching is somehow not the real thing.

**Male and Female Desire**

There are four primal teshukahs in the world, say the sages. There are four beings full of life-force, seeking to overflow and share that gift of life with others. One of those beings is God. It should come as no surprise that a perfect Being would experience, rather intensely, the desire we call teshukah. The Almighty loves not because He is needy but because He is full. He wants to share that fullness with others. And to that end, He created a world.

Another being possessed with life-force is rain. The land is parched without rain, the land needs rain -- but it is rain that experiences teshukah for land. Rain wants to give land what it can. Rain becomes meaningful because of its ability to nourish and to share itself with land. Without land, rain is frustrated, restless. The desire of rain to give life to land is intense.

Another great teshukah in the world, say the sages, is the desire of the feminine for the masculine. What is the nature of this desire?

To be sure, both men and women desire one another -- but they do so for different reasons. Let's talk about men. In traditional Jewish marriage a man gives a ring to a woman, not the other way around. The reason for this is that a verse in Deuteronomy (22:13) describes the man as the active partner, the one who "takes" a woman as his wife. Now this might strike some as sexist, but I don't think the ancient sages saw it this way. Fifteen centuries or so ago, the Sages of the Talmud wondered about that verse in Deuteronomy; why, they asked, does the Torah state "when a man shall take a woman...", why is he, not she, cast as the active partner in marriage and courtship?

Here is their answer:

It is comparable to a person who lost something. Who goes searching after who? I would say: The person who lost something searches after that which they lost. (Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin, 3b)

The sages are alluding to something in this cryptic Talmud statement. Remember the verse in Deuteronomy talks about a man "taking" a woman. Keep that word in your head as you flip through the first couple chapters of Genesis. If you search for the very first occurrences of the word "take" in the Bible, you will come across the following verse, "And [the Lord] took one of Adam's ribs, closed up his skin, and built [the rib] he had taken from man, into woman..." (Genesis, 2:20-21).

When a man "takes" a woman in marriage, what he is really doing is taking back his lost rib. A person who experiences a loss is the one who searches for that which he lost. The masculine desires the feminine because a man understands, on some basic level, that he is missing his lost feminine side, and he is seeking to reunite with her.

The feminine desires the masculine for other reasons. The feminine does not have imprinted on her soul the sense that she is missing something without a man. Woman was created as a whole being, and she does not experience that same masculine sense of lack within herself. Instead the feminine desires the masculine out of teshukah. The feminine -- like rain and like God -- embodies a mysterious life force, and she seeks to give that gift to the masculine.

The Talmud takes for granted that, generally speaking, women want to get married more than men do. This assumption should not surprise us. Desires based upon fullness are always more intense than desires based merely upon lack.

"Its Desire Is Unto You..."

We are now, I think, in a position to understand what God was saying to Cain in the moments before he murdered Abel. He was talking to Cain about his Evil Inclination, and he was telling him something both startling and profound. There is a fourth primal teshukah in the world. It is the teshukah, Cain, that your Evil Inclination has for you.

What God was telling Cain forces us to redefine our very notion of the Evil Inclination. When we think of the Evil Inclination, we tend to think of something, well, evil. We imagine some sort of devil bent on getting us to stray, or we imagine a dark part of our soul trying to corrupt us. But that's not how God portrays it here. Is it possible that the Evil Inclination, like the Almighty Himself, like rain, like femininity, has a powerful life force to share? That it is a neutral, even benevolent force? It seems paradoxical. Why then, would we call it "evil?" But not all paradoxes are false.

If you recall the arguments we made in our earlier series of articles, Serpents of Desire: Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden, this approach to the "Evil Inclination" will not seem entirely foreign to you. In the articles that follow, we will examine more carefully this notion of the Evil Inclination, and the relationship that Cain is being asked to build with it. In so doing, I think we will finally understand why the story of Cain is so intimately related to the Tree of Knowledge, and why the unique challenges facing Cain are nothing more than the misbegotten step-children of its fruits.
Piel verbs are the same as their regular counterparts, just more intense versions of them. For example: Shavar means "to break"; shiber, the piel form, means "to smash."

Our passions can be directed to drive us to greatness, "or" they can pull us into the depths of self-destruction.

Eve hears words whose echo will later speak to her son, Cain, as well, "Your teshukah shall be to your husband, yet he can rule over you..." (Genesis 3:16).

The end of the sentence sounds harsh, and one can wonder whether, over the centuries, it was used by authoritarian husbands to justify the use of an iron hand at home. But just because the verse may have been used that way, doesn't mean this is what it really means. In Hebrew the verb "rule over" -- moshel -- is spelled identically to the noun mashal, a word that means "parable." The similarity suggests a relationship between moshel and mashal, between "ruling over something" and "parables." What might this be?

Why Parables Rule

Why do people tell parables? Parables aren't just stories. They are stories that are meant to interpret reality. Something happens and it seems inexplicable. When I try and explain to you what has occurred, when I try and make sense of it, I give you a story, a parable, which I present as comparable in some important way to what happened.

In that sense, parables can be said to "rule" over experience. An experience in and of itself is blind and raw. It is composed of an almost infinite array of tiny events and subtleties, and can be viewed in a myriad of ways. A good parable helps us sort out what is essential from what is incidental. It takes a series of events and directs our understanding of them in a particular way.

What does a good "ruler" do? He takes the raw energy of the nation he is privileged to lead and directs it towards certain ends. The energy of a nation is a blind force; it can be used in an infinite variety of ways. In submitting a budget proposal to Congress, a president is in fact setting an agenda; he is submitting his vision of where the country ought to be going, and his intention to direct the energy of the nation -- its wealth -- towards certain, hopefully productive ends. A ruler takes raw energy and decides how to make wise use of it.

That, in a word, is the challenge which the feminine places before the masculine. As we discussed earlier, it is the teshukah, the desire, of the feminine to establish a relationship with the masculine and share her life-force with him. That places a responsibility in the lap of the masculine. He must decide what he will do with this gift. Newly empowered by his union with woman, man finds himself wondering what he will do with his life, how he will direct this powerful energy outside the immediate confines of their personal relationship. He must decide what goals to achieve using that which has been entrusted to him.

Looking Past the Devil in the Bright Red Suit

The echo of these ideas -- of teshukah and moshel, of feminine and masculine -- occurs not thirty verses later, when God speaks to Cain about his Evil Inclination, "Its teshukah will be for you, yet you can rule over it..."

As I mentioned before, we are used to thinking of the Evil Inclination as "evil." That is certainly understandable, especially considering its name. But the sages of the Midrash seemed to have other ideas. They include the Evil Inclination as among the four primal forces that experience "teshukah," a desire born not of lack but of fullness. They seem to envision the Evil Inclination as some kind of life force that overflows, and then seeks to share itself with man. Although this at first seems counterintuitive, when you really think about it, it shouldn't be all that surprising.

It is worth asking ourselves: What, really, is this thing we call the Evil Inclination? In Serpents of Desire we considered this question in some detail. I suggested there that we often think of the Evil Inclination as something vaguely metaphorical or blatantly childish. We might picture a devil dressed up in a bright red suit, complete with horns and tail, or an angel with a little too much time on his hands who sits above our left shoulder and whispers bad advice in our ears. But in real life, what is this thing?

The Midrash offers a clue. According to the Bible, when the Almighty looked back on the whole of creation, He declared "behold, it was very good." The rabbis of the Midrash saw this as a pronouncement about the goodness of the entirety of creation, even its unsavory parts, "...and behold it was very good," this refers to the Evil Inclination.

The comment seems astounding -- but the rabbis immediately clarify their thinking, asking the obvious question:
Can the Evil Inclination really be classified as "very good?" It seems impossible! Rather, were it not for the Evil Inclination, a man would not build a house and would not marry a woman; he would not have children, and would not engage in business... (Bereishis Rabbah, 9:7)

The Evil Inclination, in real life, is nothing more or less than our passions, the desires that fuel us and make us go. These desires, far from being inherently evil, are an essential part of our humanity. A man without passion builds no house and never marries. Cut off from ambition, he in the end builds nothing worthwhile out of his life.

**Of Cars and Steering Wheels**

So if the Evil Inclination is so good, why is it so bad?

That, I think is precisely what God was trying to explain to Cain in His speech, "Its teshukah is to you, yet you can rule over it."

The passions are not in and of themselves evil. They constitute a powerful life force, inherently benign, whose only "desire," as it were, is to establish a relationship with you. They want to overflow, to give of themselves to you. But the power of these passions is awesome -- and awesome power, when left raw and undirected, can indeed lead to great evil.

If Cain "does well," if he properly directs his passions, then "lift up!" -- he can lift up his face and look himself in the mirror in the morning. But if he does not do well -- if he fails to direct these passions; if he stays neutral and lets them run wild in his soul -- well, that itself may not be a sin, but, "sin lies crouching at the door." It's only a matter of time before the engine we call passion, cut off from the steering wheel meant to guide it, drives its rider over the nearest cliff.

The responsibility thus devolves upon Cain to "rule" his passions. Not to crush them, but to direct their power and energy, as a ruler directs the energy of the nation he governs. A car isn't a car if you destroy the engine. But it's also only a safe vehicle if you decide to use the steering wheel. (1)

**Why Now?**

Why did God make this speech right here, right now?

A talk about passion, steering wheels, and the dangers of neutrality is all very nice and fine -- it sure seems a nice thing to put somewhere in Deuteronomy -- but what does it have to do with the issues that Cain is struggling with right now? I think we can assume that when the Almighty spoke the words He did to Cain, He was not just looking for an opportunity to make a good speech; He was talking directly and personally to Cain. Cain is stung by God's rejection of his offering and is contemplating harm against his brother. What guidance is this speech offering him?

It is time to return to the mysterious linkage the Bible seems to create between our story, the episode of Cain and Abel, and the saga of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Earlier, we noted how the language that describes the expulsion from Eden is vividly recreated in the verses that describe the aftermath of Abel's murder. God asks Adam and Cain the same "ayeh" question; Adam hides from God, and so does Cain; Adam suffers exile and difficulty in farming, and so does Cain. But these ideas are not merely repeated from story to story; they intensify from story to story as well. With Adam, God quests after a temporarily missing person (Adam); with Cain, He quests after a permanently missing one (Abel). Adam hides momentarily; Cain, forever. Adam is exiled, but can find a new home elsewhere; Cain is condemned to never call anyplace "home."

The pattern of similarity and intensification seemed to suggest that the story of Cain and Abel is a more "intense" version, somehow, of the Adam and Eve story. It appears that one story sets up the other; that the challenges that befall Cain are precisely those we might expect in a world where mankind has just partaken from the Tree of Knowledge. But why is this so? What does a tale about eating some nice-looking but forbidden fruit have to do with a bout of sibling rivalry that unfortunately ends in murder?

The answer, in a word, is "passion." Passion, and its proper role in the psyche of man, is the conceptual core of both these stories. To see how this is so, though, will require a short journey back into territory we covered earlier, in *Serpents of Desire*. Let's refresh our memory.

**Who is Afraid of the Big Bad Snake?**

In *Serpents of Desire* we argued that the essential temptation of the primal serpent revolved around how man is meant to relate to the voice of desire, of instinctual passion, that he finds inside him. Animals, such as snakes, follow God's will not by listening to commands, but by obeying their passions, by listening to their natural, God given instincts and urges. Every time a lioness hunts a gazelle, or a Grizzly bear plucks a salmon out of an Alaskan river, an animal has followed the voice of God.
The snake holds out the possibility that perhaps man should adopt the same approach to his relationship with the Deity, "Even if God said do not eat from the trees of the garden... [so what]" (see Genesis 3:1).

God may have told you not to eat of the tree, but do you want to? If so, you are faced with a contradiction: Which divine voice will you listen to? God's spoken words, or the voice of God that beats insistently inside you -- the voice of instinct, passion and desire?

Speaking for myself, the snake argues, it is not much of a contest. The voice of desire, for an animal, always reigns supreme.

In the act of reaching for the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve succumbed to the snake's argument. As a result, they changed. They elevated the role of passion in their lives, increasing the power of the engine that burns inside of them. In so doing, they became more powerful -- but they also introduced an element of imbalance into who they were. Their "engines" might be more powerful, but their "steering wheels" -- their ability to control and channel their passions -- had not changed at all. The basic challenge of the post-tree world is this: When you take the V6 engine out of your Camry and replace it with a V10, how do you effectively steer the car anymore?

It is that challenge which Cain, and all subsequent inhabitants of the post-tree world, are left to grapple with.

**From Eden to Cain**

The story of Cain and Abel, at first glance, seems a sorry tale of sibling rivalry which tragically gets out of hand. But as we have seen recently, the story is about much more than sibling rivalry. There is a deep passion that Cain is contending with. This passion is a force of dizzying power, and it "wishes," so to speak, to do nothing more than bond with Cain and fill him with its life-affirming power. Cain, somehow, must rule over it, must direct its power.

What is the name of that passion?

Did you ever wonder why Adam and Eve, in the wake of eating from the Tree of Knowledge, were -- of all things -- fearful of their nakedness? If they sensed that the desires and passion within themselves were stronger than before, that these were now forces to be feared, why was it then that it was precisely their nakedness, their new consciousness of sexuality, that they feared? There are other passions in the world. Why is sexuality singled out?

The answer, I think, is that the Tree of Knowledge was not just about passion in general. It was, somehow, about a particular kind of passion:

The snake argued to Eve: God ate from this tree and created the world. He doesn't want you to eat from it, for if you do, you will be empowered to create other worlds. Everyone knows that a craftsman hates his competitors... (Midrash, Bereishis Rabbah, 19:4)

More than anything else, the Tree of Knowledge, according to the sages, was about the mysterious and sublime drive to create.

In the realm of human biology, creativity expresses itself in sexuality; hence, Adam and Eve, immediately after eating from the Tree, fear their nakedness. They feel dwarfed by this force called sexuality. But creativity expresses itself in many other realms, too. One of those realms is agriculture. In agriculture, creativity expresses itself as the desire to plant.

Sexuality and planting...

Cain, the first living product of the miracle we call human sexuality, the child of a mother who exclaims in ecstasy that she has acquired a man with God -- he chooses to become a farmer. We argued earlier that this was not a coincidence. Cain devotes his life to create with land, just as his mother had created with her womb.

The drive to create -- or even better, the drive to create in partnership with God -- is perhaps the deepest passion we human beings can know. This passion is so deep and sublime, it is quite nearly godly. As our friend the snake once said, if you eat from the Tree..."you shall be as gods, knowing good and evil..." (Genesis 3:4).

But this same passion, ironically, can also be the source of great evil. Indeed, as we remarked once before, the words "Evil Inclination" are only an approximate translation of their Hebrew equivalents. The original Hebrew words are "i>yetzer hara." As we mentioned in Serpents of Desire, the term yetzer comes from the word yotzer, which means "to create." Rendered literally, the Evil Inclination, at bottom, seems to be nothing more than "the drive to create gone awry."

What the Almighty was telling Cain, I think, is that even a passion as holy as the drive to join with God in creation must still be channeled. As ironic as it sounds, this apparently spiritual drive can potentially be destructive; it can force a wedge between man and the source of all creativity, God Himself. Whether creativity becomes holy or destructive mostly depends on who is doing the driving: The engine or the steering wheel.

What, precisely, does holy creativity look like, and how do you tell the difference between it and its fraternal twin, destructive creativity? These are the questions that God's speech puts out to us, front and center. And it is to these questions that we shall return next week.
This idea is expressed nicely in another Midrashic comment made by the sages. We quoted their saying in Serpents of Desire, but it is worth calling attention to it again:

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to man: I have created the Evil Inclination, and I have created Torah, its "tavlin." If you take the "tavlin," you will be fine; if not, you will be endangered...

The word tavlin here is often translated as antidote, as if to suggest that the Evil Inclination is a sickness that must be cured, a cancer that must be gotten rid of. But that is not the literal meaning of the word tavlin. In Hebrew, tavlin actually means "spice" -- the stuff you go into a supermarket and get to help you with dinner that night. The sages are in fact saying something remarkable. What is it that we put spice on? We put it on food, we put it on meat. If the Torah is spice, the Evil Inclination is food. Passion is the meat, the stuff of life itself. Torah is the spice that directs how it tastes. Without Torah, passion is bland -- undirected, and ultimately dangerous. With Torah, passion is the dish of kings.

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Thank You Presents The World's First Murder, Part 13

When giving a thank you gift there is always the danger that our intentions may be to insure our place in the relationship, rather than express our gratitude.

"It's teshukah is for you, yet you can rule over it" (Genesis 4:7).

If the yetzer of Cain is the drive to create, the passion to plant crops and create in partnership with God, what would it mean for Cain to "rule over" this?

The answer, I think, takes us back to Thomas Edison and the Glassblower.

The glassblower was fired with the passion to create in partnership with Edison. The crucial question, for him, was: How would this affect his relationship with Edison? Would it destroy that relationship or enhance it? It would all depend on whether the glassblower could "rule over" his passion, or whether his passion would rule over him.

If the glassblower is consumed by his desire to create with Edison, if he is held in its thrall -- well, that alone is not sinful, but "sin," as it were "lies crouching at the door." As we discussed earlier, the glassblower may find himself looking at Edison merely as a tool to realize his own creative ambitions. His goal in giving a gift to Edison would thus become little more than bribery, a bald faced attempt to ensure that the inventor does not get himself another glassblower.

And so it might be with Cain. When the drive to join God in the act of creation is left undirected, it can slowly become an obsession, a powerful, gnawing, end in itself. When this happens, anything can be sacrificed on its altar -- even, ironically, Cain's relationship with God Himself. If I see God as a necessary instrument to make my creativity flourish, to let my crops grow, I may relentlessly try to "buy Him off." As I reach brazenly for the keys to the Heavenly Cookie Jar, I'll give God plenty of gifts -- but gifts of a curiously "average" quality. I offer to my heavenly partner only that which is necessary to ensure his continued co-operation in our mutual endeavor.

There is, however, another alternative. Cain, like the glassblower, has a choice to make. Rather than be controlled by the monumental passion to create with God, I can rule over it. I can direct the fearsome power of this force. I can direct it towards the heroic stance we call gratitude.

If Cain can but steer his passion, it will become an engine for something profoundly positive. The offering that Cain gives will not be about bribery, but about overwhelming gratitude. It will not be a crass attempt to ensure that the keys to the Heavenly cookie jar always remain comfortably within reach. It
will be something infinitely more valuable -- a humble expression of appreciation for letting me share in the secret of creation with my Creator, the Creator of All.

Roses for Dad and Mom

The difference between the two stances, and between the impact each has on the relationship between creature and creator, could not be more significant.

When Sam and his fiancée arrive at his parents' home for their first visit since Sam graduated from medical school, mom and dad are flattered to notice that the couple has brought them flowers. But what do the flowers mean? Mom and dad have spent a good deal of toil and treasure to put Sam through medical school. If the flowers are expressions of gratitude, if they signify their child's deeply felt recognition of the great gift they have given to him -- well, there is nothing that warms a parent's heart more than this. Such a gift contributes powerfully to the quality of the relationship between parent and child.

But what if the roses are not about gratitude? Sam and his new bride will look to his parents for much help in the future, as they struggle through years of internship and residency. What if the flowers are a calculated attempt to keep mom and dad happy? What if Sam and his bride are giving a perfunctory, average gift that will serve nicely, they hope, as an insurance policy to ensure dad and mom's continuous support?

There is no greater heartbreak than receiving a gift like this. One wonders whether perhaps it is better to give nothing at all. A gift that is a mere insurance policy demeans the relationship between parent and child; it cheapens the natural love of a creator for his offspring by turning that love into a mere commodity to be hoarded, to be squirreled away for a rainy day. Worse, it turns the creator into a mere tool of the child's creativity; a creativity that ultimately becomes self-centered and self-serving. The creator becomes nothing but a pawn in a great chess game that revolves insidiously around the ever expanding ambitions of the child.

Cain brings the quintessential "average" gift to His Creator, and the Almighty, the Great Parent in the Sky, takes Cain aside to have a little talk with him about all this.

"Why are you angry and why has your face fallen?" he asks Cain. Your anger and depression are out of place, for the ball is entirely in your court: "If you do well," if you guide your powerful desire to create along with Me, "you can lift up [your face]." A gift that expresses gratitude will always be accepted by your Creator, and you can look yourself in the eye in the mirror after giving it. "But if you do not do well," if you fail to steer your passion, if you adopt a position of neutrality, then "sin lies crouching at the door." You risk sacrificing our very relationship on the altar of blind creativity. "The teshukah of your passion is for you, yet you can rule over it." you can transform its raw power into gratitude; into something that enhances, rather than destroys, our relationship.

Cain does not listen. He persists in his insistence that the source of his problems lay outside of him; that he has been victimized by someone else, anyone else. He cannot kill God for failing to accept his gift -- the Almighty is impervious to arrows and spears -- so he does the next best thing. He lashes out in a different direction, killing Abel, the brother whose offering found favor with his Maker.

Cain's rage, like the surging creativity inside him, is blind: His act of murder does not appear premeditated; it seems spontaneous. Indeed, the sages tell us that Cain killed "inadvertently." He did not know that his violence would destroy Abel, as the ultimate fruits of physical brutality were, at the time, a great unknown. No one had ever been killed before. Tragically, perhaps Cain is being truthful when he tells God that he simply does not know where Abel is anymore. But none of that matters; what is done is done, and cannot be taken back. Abel's blood cries out from the ground. Creativity has caught up with Cain. It is no longer crouching at the door. It has sprung, and has devoured both killer and victim within its jaws.

The Core of the Triangle

At long last, we are finally in a position to see the global picture, the composite portrait being painted in these first two human dramas in the Book of Genesis, the sagas of the Forbidden Fruit and the World's First Murder. As we have seen, both stories revolve around the proper role of passion in the psyche of humankind. Failure in one story brought death into the world in theory; and failure in the other brought death into the world in practice. Failure in each story brought exile, difficulty farming, and hiding from God.

As we argued before, the stories of Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel are closely connected; the latter story doesn't just happen to come after the former one; it really is its sequel, conceptually and thematically. A process starts in the first of these stories, and that process takes another step in the second story. And each of these steps is accompanied by three, inter-related consequences: Exile, difficulty farming and hiding from God.

As we draw to a close our meditation on these stories, we might wonder: "Why?" Why, in fact, does failure to wield passion properly, failure to properly harness the fiery will to create -- why does this kind of failure lead to these particular consequences?

We began to consider this question towards the end of our last series, Serpents of Desire. But I think we are in a position to understand this more deeply now.

Before next week, I'd like you to stop and think about these three things: Exile, difficulty farming, and hiding from God. Ask yourself: How, if at all, are these things related to one another? What is the core of this three sided triangle? Is there a common drum to which they all beat?

I think that there is.
1 The Torah states that before Cain killed Abel, both brothers were in the field, and the beginning of a conversation ensued between them. But it was only the beginning of a conversation. Most translations will render the action leading up to murder in something like the following terms: “Cain spoke to Abel, and it happened, when they were both in the field, [that] Cain came upon Abel and killed him.” The problem is though, that the Hebrew term for Cain's speaking to Abel is not vayedaber but vayomer, which means that the text does not really translate as “Cain spoke to Abel” but “Cain said to Abel.” This, however, creates a non-sequitor: If I tell you that x spoke to y, I don't need to tell you what was said between them, but if I tell you that x said to y, I do have to tell you what was said, or else the sentence is incomplete. The sense of the verse, therefore, is of an interrupted conversation; that Cain started saying something to Abel, and by rights, we should hear what it is -- but before actually getting to it, Cain interrupted what he was saying and killed Abel instead. The murder was an impulsive, violent end, perhaps, to something that perhaps could have been resolved through mere words.

2 According to one Midrash (Midrash Rabbah, Deuteronomy 2:26), this explains why Cain's punishment was exile. Later passages in the Torah set forth that a murderer who deliberately kills is subject to capital punishment, but one who kills inadvertently, or without full knowledge of what he is doing, is instead exiled from his land (see Numbers, 35:22-25). Cain's exile, according to the Midrash, was the initial prototype of that law.

There's No Place Like Home: The World's First Murder, Part 14

Our connection to the land has similarities to our connection to God.

Exile; difficulty farming; hiding from God. What's the common theme?

We can begin by doing a little consolidating. As we noted earlier, the Torah seems to treat exile and difficulty farming as dual expressions of a larger idea -- the advent of a certain distance between man and land:

And now, cursed are you from the land that opened its maw to take your brother's blood from your hands. When you work the land, it will no longer give its strength to you; a wanderer shall you be in the land. (Genesis 4:11-12)

We can think of these words as forming a kind of triangle. The fact that Cain is cursed from the earth -- distanced from the land -- is the top of the triangle, the "topic-sentence" as it were. The two points at the base of the triangle then clarify what this "distance from the land" means in real life: It means that you will experience difficulty farming and exile. These two things express a kind of alienation Cain will feel with respect to the land.

We can now go back and simplify our query. Having seen the unifying theme in "difficulty farming" and "exile," we are now looking for common denominators between two elements, rather than three. We now want to know: What does "distance from the earth" and "hiding from God" have in common?

Well, the ideas of "hiding" and "distance" are certainly similar. When one hides from someone else, one is avoiding contact with them, creating distance. Let's now ask: What, if anything, do "earth" and "God" have in common?

At first glance, you might answer that "earth" and "God" could not be more different. One is the Master of the Universe; the other, a part of that universe. One is the most powerful Being that exists; the other, a mere inanimate object.

But there is a similarity. We get a clue to it from the anguish Cain feels at the prospect of alienation from both these entities, God and land, "My sin is greater than I can bear. Here, you have cast me away from the face of the land, and from Your face I will hide" (Genesis, 4:13).

We mentioned earlier that the verb for "cast away" is the same as the Hebrew word for divorce -- geirashti. Something personal is happening here: The land, like God, is an important being in Cain's life, and somehow, Cain is banished from beholding the "face" of both these beings, "You have cast me away from the face of the land, and from Your face I will hide."
Why is all this so personal?

**Let Us Make Man**

Some earlier verses will help us out here, I believe.

Back in the beginning of Genesis, when mankind is first created, the Almighty uses a curious turn of phrase. "Let us make man..." He declares. Over the ages, Biblical commentators have struggled to understand the use of the plural here. Who was God talking to when He said "us?"

Christians, as one might imagine, tend to see this as alluding to different facets of God which they call "the Trinity." Judaism, which sees God as an indivisible oneness, has never been much of a fan of the Trinity idea, and Jewish commentators have seen the verse quite differently. Rashi suggests that perhaps God was speaking to the angels. The 13th century Spanish sage Nachmanides has a particularly fascinating interpretation. In an eerie harbinger of modern Big Bang theory, he writes the following:

> It was only on the first day of creation that God created something from nothing. From then on, He fashioned everything from the elements He had brought into being on the First Day. For example, He empowered water to give rise to living things, as it is stated "let the water swarm..." and He allowed animal life to emerge from the land, as the verse states: "Let the land bring forth living things (Genesis 1:23)." When He created man, though, the Lord said: "Let us make man..." In so doing, the Almighty was speaking to the earth -- the last "being" to bring forth life [see the immediately preceding verse about earth "bringing forth" the animals]. In effect, He was saying: "You and I together will make man. You will contribute the elements for the body, as you did for the animals, and I will contribute the soul, as it is written: 'and He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.'" (Nachmanides to Genesis 1:26)

The implications of Nachmanides words are astounding, and not just for the way in which he seems to anticipate the direction of modern biology, seven centuries before Pasteur, Darwin and Mendel were even a gleam in history's eye. Nachmanides is suggesting here a key to the mysterious connection between man and land. Men will fight and die for land, and will form intense emotional bonds to the ground they call home. Why? Because, at the end of the day, land is not a mere "thing." It, along with God, is the source from which we come. And because of that, it will always matter personally to us.

A creature always wants a relationship with its creator. We long to live in harmony with our parents, for, as Dorothy famously said, "there's no place like home." On some level, it is to both land and God that mankind longs to return -- a dream that ironically, is perhaps fully realized only in death, "Dust you are, and to the dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:18). "The dust [that comprises the body] shall go back to the land, as it once was; and the spirit will return to the Lord who had imparted it" (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

**Cain, God and Mother Earth**

It is no coincidence that we call land, "Mother Earth," for she provides mankind with the essential gifts of femininity: nourishment and a safe place to be; a place to call home.

A mother provides a safe environment for her family. This is true not only physically, but emotionally. A home, at its best, is a place where children need not fear the caprice and unpredictability of the outside world. Likewise, a mother provides nourishment -- not only physically, but emotionally. She provides not just food but love -- nurturing her offspring and helping them grow into stable and happy human beings.

A woman gives these twin gifts, nourishment and a place to be, not just to her fully developed family, but to her developing family as well. She gives them at the very beginning, through the organ that is the embodiment of femininity, the womb. For what does a womb provide for the fetus ensconced within it? It provides total nourishment, as well as a perfectly calibrated "safe place to be," an environment completely insulated from the shocks of the outside world.

Mother earth provides these gifts to her children, too. She provides us with a place to be, a home in which we can live, and she also provides us with nourishment -- the agricultural bounty of her fertile soil.

Cain, in the wake of Abel's murder, finds himself distanced from both these aspects of land, and he finds himself hiding from God. Having failed to give his all to his own Creator, he becomes aware that Mother Earth will no longer give her all to him, "When you work the earth, it will no longer give its strength to you" (Genesis, 4:11).

Instinctively, Cain knows exactly what this means. It is a punishment greater than he can bear: He has been "cast away" from the "faces" of Mother Earth and from the Almighty, becoming painfully out of touch with his ultimate creators.

At long last, we can go back and plot the continuum of these narratives, the sagas of the Tree of Knowledge and of Cain and Abel, and we can see how they integrate, almost seamlessly, into one story.

**From Forbidden Fruit to Murder**
As we saw earlier, when Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge, they brought the creative will inside of them more powerfully than ever before. In so doing, they became "godly," after a fashion, "and you shall be as gods, knowing good and evil."

But they were only "half-godly." They were passionate; driven, like God to create and foster new life -- but, unlike God, their ability to properly steer this newly fired sense of creativity remained limited, and out of proportion with its power.

God's creativity is inherently disciplined. The Creator of All understands that the world needs not just life, but death at the appropriate time as well. When a baby develops in the womb, its hands begin as a kind of formless paddle. Fingers are formed only because skin cells between each of the digits are programmed to die and fall away, sculpting what we call a hand in the inky blackness of the womb. Death in the service of life is painful and sad -- but sometimes necessary. A disciplined creator works with death as well as life, sculpting with exquisite care everything from galaxies, to ecosystems, to babies.2

As a consequence of eating from the tree, man is powerfully creative, but the question is: Can he also be disciplined? The possibility that the answer to this might be negative has many consequences. Adam and Eve become immediately fearful of their nakedness; aware the raw power of sexuality could crush them. Moreover, man -- possessor of unbridled creativity -- finds himself distanced from his own creators, God and land. Finally, mankind flounders as well with their own ability to create: In the wake of the Tree of Knowledge, pain in childbirth is brought into the world for the first time.

The very next story in the Bible, the saga of Cain and Abel, picks up where the previous episode left off. For after eating from the Tree of Knowledge, the great question facing mankind is: How, in fact, will we steer the fearsome force of creativity that beats so insistently inside us? Cain must ask himself: Will he be ruled by his passion to create -- will he sacrifice his relationship with God on that altar? Or will he rule over that passion, and enhance his relationship with God instead?

In failing to meet this challenge, in failing to guide the inherently blind creative will he possessed so richly, Cain suffers an intensification of the consequences felt by his parents. He, like Adam, is alienated from his creators -- but more permanently so. He intuits that he shall not merely hide from God momentarily, but shall spend his life in that state of hiding [...and from your face I will hide]. Likewise, he suffers a more profound alienation from mother earth -- a complete inability to find a home on her soil, and utter frustration in reaping the nourishment she can provide.

From Cain's World to Our World

Cain fails. But his story is not over, "Its desire is unto you, but you can rule over it."

Cain did not listen to what God had to tell him. But the words of that speech were not wasted. Cain's predicament is timeless, and the struggle to deal with creativity and to somehow channel its force constructively -- this challenge is with us as much today as it was then. The words of God's speech to Cain, preserved timelessly in the Torah, speak to us as well as to the original recipient of that message. Perhaps, centuries and millennia later, we can find it within ourselves to listen to them.

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1 This perspective is confirmed by a later verse in which Cain summarizes his punishments using the following language: My sin is greater than I can bear. Here you have cast me away from the face of the earth and from the face of God I will hide. In Cain's view, it is about two things: Distance from land and distance from God.

2 In the Jewish tradition, God is associated deeply with the concept of "truth" (e.g. "the seal of the Almighty is truth" -- see Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbos, 55a). In Hebrew, the word "truth" is spelled aleph, mem, tav. Its very structure suggests the idea of balance between life and death. Aleph is the first letter of the alphabet; mem is the middle letter of the alphabet; and tav is the last. The first and middle letter of the word spells "em," which means "mother." The middle and last letters o the name spell "met," which means "death."

The seal of God is truth -- disciplined creativity. "Emet" suggests the exquisite balance between motherhood, the intense drive to foster life, and "death," which imposes discipline on raw life and makes something meaningful out of it.

The Death of Cain. The World's First Murder, Epilogue

Does the one who brings death into the world deserve protection from God?

How did Cain die?
We don't know for sure. The Bible doesn't tell us. But the sages of the Midrash had something to say about the matter. Working with various clues from the Biblical text, they patched together an account of how the man who committed the first murder met his own demise.

The story they tell is bizarre and haunting. At face value, it borders on the absurd. But Midrashic stories are not necessarily meant to be interpreted at face value. They often use the language of allegory to point to deeper, underlying currents in a story. For all its improbability, then, the story the Midrash tells about Cain's death may be quite "truthful" indeed.

Let's begin our look at the Midrashic elaboration with an eye towards the Biblical clues that it is based upon. As near as I can figure it, these are some of the issues that nudged the sages towards their view of how Cain died:

### An Unexplained Fear

The Torah records that after Cain killed Abel, the Lord imposed a number of punishments upon Cain. In response, Cain turned to God and expressed his concern that his own demise will not be long in coming:

> And Cain said to God, "My sin is greater than I can bear... anyone who finds me will kill me." God replied to him, "Therefore -- anyone who kills Cain will be avenged seven-fold," and God placed a mark upon Cain, so that all who find him would not kill him. (Genesis 4:13-15)

We might ask: Why, exactly, does Cain feel so vulnerable? It is true that God has imposed a number of punishments on him, from difficulty farming to exile, but He has not decreed that Cain deserves to be killed. The Lord has not posted any "Cain: Wanted, Dead or Alive" signs around the local neighborhood. Why, then, is Cain so worried? Moreover, who exactly are these other people that Cain fears will do him in? The world's aggregate population was pretty tiny at the time. Besides his parents and Mrs. Cain, there weren't too many others around. Who, really, is Cain afraid of?

Rashi, grandfather of the medieval commentators, is bothered by this question. His answer, which originates in the Midrash, is that the killers Cain feared were not men but animals. That is, Cain was worried that, in the wake of his act of murder, a beast might devour him.

Does Rashi solve the problem? Well, perhaps he explains who might kill him, but he doesn't seem to explain why. Why would Cain all of a sudden worry that animals would kill him? God didn't command animals to avenge Abel's blood. What's more, if Cain had the means to defend himself adequately against the animal world before he killed Abel, he presumably had these same capabilities afterwards, too. Why, all of a sudden, does he become afraid?

### The Mystery of "Seven-Fold Vengeance"

So Cain's fear of death is one oddity -- but it is not the only one. Another strange thing is God's response to this fear, his promise to Cain that whoever kills him will suffer sevenfold vengeance. Why, for starters, would God want to promise such a thing to Cain? It is one thing to soothe Cain by telling him that he will be protected from would-be-killers -- but why extend to Cain, a murderer, the assurance that one who kills him will be punished seven times more severely than the crime warrants? God didn't extend this courtesy to Abel, the innocent victim of murder. Why extend it to Cain, Abel's killer?

And there's another problem, too: What exactly does "seven-fold vengeance" really mean? Presumably, the worst thing God could do to a killer of Cain, by way of vengeance, would be to kill that person himself. But that's not sevenfold vengeance -- that's just plain vanilla vengeance -- a simple tit-for-tat. Where does the "seven" part fit in?

### A New Theory

A strange verse, tucked away at the end of the story of Cain and Abel, may hold the key to answering these questions.

Just after the Torah tells us of Cain's punishments, it goes on to give a long list of genealogical tables. We hear all about Cain's descendants -- who gave birth to who, and how long they lived. Many might wonder why the Bible felt it necessary to include all this apparently trivial information. But if you stop and actually read these genealogical tables, you will find something curious: The Torah goes into a great amount of detail about one particular family, a family which appears at the very end of the chain of descendants. We are told the names and professions of each child, and then, strangely enough, the text quotes, verbatim, a short and cryptic declaration made by the father of these children.

In that speech, the father speaks about having killed a man. And he also speaks of the "sevenfold vengeance" of Cain, as well as vengeance that will be exacted against him, this latter-day killer. And what's more, if we bother to count all the "who-begat-who's" in between, we will find that this mysterious mention of murder occurs precisely at -- wouldn't you know it -- the seventh generation removed from Cain.

An interesting possibility begins to unfold. Maybe these verses are describing, somehow, the carrying out of the mysterious vengeance of Cain. Maybe the phrase "sevenfold" didn't refer to the severity of the vengeance (that someone would be killed seven times over) but to the time at which it occurs. Maybe the promised vengeance would take place after a seven-fold lapse in generations, and maybe this is precisely what we are reading about at the very end of Cain's genealogical table.
Such a possibility bears, at least, further exploration. So let's take a closer look at these strange events that occur seven generations removed from Cain. What, in fact, happened at that promised "seventh generation?"

**The Lemech Connection**

Only a few details are clear. We are introduced to a man named Lemech, and we are told that he has two wives and four children -- three boys and a girl. We know their names. The three boys are Yaval, Yuval and Tuval-Kayin, and the girl is named Na'ama. Yaval becomes "the father of all shepherds and tent-dwellers." Yuval becomes the "father of harps and cymbals" -- i.e. the inventor of the first musical instruments. And Tuval-Kayin is the inventor of ironworks, the first to fashion metal weaponry.

The Torah then tells us that one day, Lemech convened his two wives, and made a strange speech to them:

*Listen to my voice; wives of Lemech, hearken to my words: For I have killed a man to my injury, and a child to my wound. Yes, sevenfold was the vengeance of Cain; and Lemech, seventy-seven.* (4:23-24)

Lemech's declaration is difficult to decipher, to say the least. He talks about having killed a man and a child, and refers, strangely, to the promise of his ancestor's sevenfold vengeance. What does he mean to say?

**The Sages Parable**

The sages of the Midrash gathered the various puzzle pieces of this story, and constructed a parable that seeks, I think, to give meaning to it all. And it is here that the Midrash tells us how it thinks Cain died. According to the Midrash, here is what happened:

Lemech was a seventh generation descendant of Cain. He was blind, and he would go out hunting with his son, Tuval-Kayin. [His son] would lead him by the hand, and when he would see an animal, he would inform his father, [who would proceed to hunt it]. One day, Tuval Kayin cried out to his father: "I see something like an animal over there." Lemech pulled back on his bow and shot. ... The child peered from afar at the dead body... and said to Lemech: "What we killed bears the figure of a man, but it has a horn protruding from its forehead." Lemech then exclaimed in anguish: "Woe unto me! It is my ancestor, Cain!" and he clapped his hands together in grief. In doing so, though, he unintentionally struck Tuval-Kayin and killed him, too. (Tanchuma to Genesis, 11)

What a strange story. We hear of a hunt gone awry, with a blind Lemech shooting arrows at the beck and call of his over-eager son, little Tuval-Kayin. We hear of an elderly Cain being mistaken for an animal, walking around with a strange horn protruding from his head. What exactly was Cain doing parading around the forest in a unicorn costume?

One thing seems clear, though. According to the sages, the "man" Lemech killed "to [his] injury" was none other than Cain, and the "child" he struck "to his wound" was his own son, Tuval-Kayin. If we put two and two together, the Midrash seems to be saying that when God talked about "sevenfold vengeance" for Cain, He wasn't talking about punishing Cain's murderer. Instead, God was talking about punishing Cain himself. He was promising that Cain himself would be killed in vengeance for Abel's murder -- but that this would occur only after a sevenfold lapse in generations.¹

**The Advent of the Unicorn**

So where did Cain get that unicorn costume from? Why did he have a horn, of all things, sticking out of his forehead?

It is time to revisit, one last time, the story of Adam and Eve in Eden -- the story where the cascade leading to Cain and Abel first begins.

We noticed a while back that the Cain and Abel narrative is speckled with connections between it and the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden. A triad of consequences -- exile, difficulty farming, hiding from God -- beset mankind after they eat from the Tree, and these same consequences reappear, only more intensely, after Cain kills Abel. The Torah, as we noted, seems to be saying that the Cain and Abel episode is a further chapter in the story of the Tree of Knowledge; that Cain's act of murder was fundamentally similar to Adam and Eve's eating from the Tree. It was just another chapter in the same saga.

If we had to boil down that saga to just a single, simple sentence -- what would we say that these two, linked stories, are about?

They are about, we might say, what it really means to be a human being and not an animal.

In Eden, humanity was accosted by the primal serpent -- an animal that walked, talked and was apparently an intelligent being. The snake was very nearly human, and earlier, we argued that the challenge the snake proffers to humanity touches on how we define ourselves in relation to him -- that is, "what makes us human and him a snake." The snake begins his words with: *Even if God said don't eat from the tree, [so what?]*. God may have told you not to eat of the tree, but those words are belied by your desires. Do you want to eat? If so, God is talking to you through that desire. He put those instincts inside you, and you obey God by following them.
In making this argument, the snake was faithfully representing the perspective of the animal world. The dividing line between man and animal, we argued, lies in how one perceives that God "speaks" to him. Does God speak to you in the form of commands, or in the form of desire? Animals, such as snakes, follow God's will not by listening to God's words, His verbal commands, but by obeying their passions, their instincts -- the "voice of God inside of them." The snake, quite innocently, holds out the possibility that perhaps man should adopt the same approach. The voice of desire, for an animal, always reigns supreme.

In the act of reaching for the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve succumbed to the snake's argument. In buying the argument that, for man too, one's internal desire could be the final arbiter of God's Will, mankind lost a little bit of who he was, and became a little more snake-like.

In the wake of that failure, God punishes all the relevant parties. The snake's "punishment," though, is particularly interesting. He is told that from then on, he will eat dust, will crawl on his belly, and that hatred and strife will henceforth reign in the relationship between his progeny and the children of Eve. The common denominator in these three punishments of the snake seems evident: The snake will become more obviously different -- a being that crawls rather than walks, a being that subsists on food that men would never touch; and a being whose sight and presence registers instinctive alarm and enmity in the collective psyche of humanity. The snake will become more obviously animal-like, more clearly removed from the realm of man. Having failed once to distinguish himself from the animal world, mankind will no longer be faced with as subtle and dangerous a temptation.

But man's struggle to define himself in relation to the animal world is not yet over. The story of Cain and Abel was a further battle in the same war -- a war centered on how man is meant to relate to the passions, the creative will, that surges inside of him. Cain became enamored with his ability to create in partnership with God, and became entranced by the products of that enterprise. In the end, he sacrificed everything -- his relationship with God, and the life of his own brother -- on that altar. As the verse suggests, he had in effect used Abel's blood as fertilizer for the ground. The life of a brother had become a regrettable but acceptable casualty of Cain's continuing, intoxicating quest to bring forth life from the ground. Blind desire had once again had its way.

In the wake of that basic failure, Cain intuited a self-evident truth: He would now fear the world of beasts. Not because beasts would be interested in avenging Abel. But simply because they would perceive that Cain really was not all that different from them. The days of comfortable distance from the world of the jungle were now behind him.

Cain pleads to the Almighty for protection from these newfound threats. And the Lord accedes to the request, giving to Cain a mark that will protect him from those that would molest him. We wondered earlier why it is "fair" that Cain, a murderer, would merit special protection from death at the hands of others. But that mark, the Midrash is saying, was not some "supernatural" sign promising heavenly retribution to anyone who would harm Cain, nor was it some artificial device that would convince the animals that Cain really was a human to be feared after all. Instead, the sign, as the Midrash tells it, was a simple animal's horn. Having become vulnerable to his new compatriots in the world of the jungle, it is only fair that Cain be given a horn, the same means of defense available to any other beast.

In a savage twist of irony, though, in the end it is precisely the horn given to Cain for protection that does him in. Little Tuval-Kayin sees Cain's horn and immediately assumes that he has sighted a beast. Upon closer examination, though, the boy isn't so sure. The body of the figure is man-like and he can't figure out whether the being he killed is man or beast. He can't tell, perhaps, not because he can't see well -- that's his father's problem, not his -- but because the identity of his prey really is uncertain: Cain has crossed into the no-man's land between man and animal. Cain, the person who feared he would be killed by an animal, is killed because a person couldn't tell whether he was, in fact, man or animal.

The Child and the Blind Hunter

The story the Midrash tells is interesting not only for the way it portrays Cain, but for its view of Cain's killer as well. The image of Tuval Kayin and Lemech, the child and the blind hunter, is a memorable one. To fully understand its significance, I propose we take a quick look at the larger, extended family.

Tuval Kayin, the child weapon-maker, has two brothers -- men by the names Yuval and Yaval. If you replay the names of these three siblings over in your mind, they should sound vaguely familiar. Yuval, Yaval, and Tuval Kayin. What do they remind you of?

Well, to tell the truth, if you are used to reading the Bible in English, they may not remind you of much. But if you switch to Hebrew, the resonance in these names is unmistakable. The Hebrew original for the word "Cain" is Kayin -- a word that reappears in the appellation given his descendant, Tuval-Kayin. Likewise, the Hebrew name for "Abel" is Hevel or Haval, which sounds suspiciously similar to "Yaval," the brother of Tuval-Kayin.

The resemblance goes beyond names, too. Just as we are told the professions of Cain and Abel, we are told the professions of Tuval-Kayin and Yaval, too. And wouldn't you know it -- the professions adopted by these seventh-generation descendants bear an eerie similarity to the arts practiced by their forebears. Cain/Kayin was the word's first killer -- and Tuval-Kayin, his namesake-descendant, makes weaponry. Abel/Haval is the first shepherd in history, and his namesake-descendant in the seventh generation, Yaval, is the "father" of traveling herdsmen.

These connections did not go unnoticed by the sages of the Midrash. The rabbis commented about Tuval-Kayin, for example, that his name signifies that "he perfected [metavel (1)] the arts of Kayin." Cain killed without benefit of tools; Tuval-Kayin comes along and, by forging weaponry, gives the art of killing a technological boost. One can argue that Yaval, the seventh-generation heir to Haval/Abel, does likewise: He "perfections" the art of Abel. Abel, the ancestor, grazed his flocks, but Yaval pushed the envelope further. As Rashi puts it, he -- the "father of herdsmen" -- constantly moved his tents, transporting flocks from pasture to pasture, to ensure a virtually never ending supply of grassland. (2)

These "great leaps forward" all take place in the seventh generation from Cain and Abel. Seven, in the Torah, is a number laden with symbolic significance. It often signifies completion -- the bringing of a process to its culmination. God finished Creation in "seven" days, bringing the Universe to its finished state of being. After forty nine years -- seven times seven -- we celebrate Yovel, the Jubilee year, in which "freedom is proclaimed throughout the
and Lemech. (3) In case you missed the point, this second Lemech just happens to live to the ripe old age of seven hundred and seventy-seven years. So, when all is said and done, at seven generations, each line -- the line of Adam I and Adam II -- come to their apex. But whereas the first Lemech guessed it, Lemech. (3) In case you missed the point, this second Lemech just happens to live to the ripe old age of seven hundred and seventy-seven years. So, when all is said and done, at seven generations, each line -- the line of Adam I and Adam II -- come to their apex. But whereas the first Lemech guessed it, Lemech.

In the view of the Midrash, Lemech -- like Isaac and Eli -- is blind. It is not so much that his son is evil -- after all, Tuval-Kayin is but a child -- but the dangers of his craft are entirely lost on the oblivious father. There is a kid out there making sawed-off shotguns, and instead of restraining him, Lemech invites little Tuval out for hunting parties. Lemech can easily rationalize the deadly arts of his son -- after all, it is not guns that kill people, but people that kill people -- and if all my kid does is make the swords that others use... well, that's a good, clean living, isn't it? The mandate of parents is to guide their children, but in this case, it is little Tuval-Kayin who is the leader, guiding -- with devastating inaccuracy -- the arrows of his blind father.

The seventh generation is the apogee -- and the generations of Cain are slowly spinning out of control. Tuval-Kayin really is, "Cain Perfected." Cain failed to rule over the raging passions that beset his soul, and Lemech failed to rule over the raging power of his young son's killing machines. Seven generations from Cain, nothing has changed; it is just the stakes that have gotten higher. The legacy of the forbidden fruit is alive and well. Mankind becomes ever more snake-like, as raw power, left to its own devices, consistently overwhelms its bearer.

The Second Lemech and the Wife of Noah

The children of Lemech are the last descendants of Cain that the world will ever know. The great flood -- the ultimate destruction of humanity -- is right around the corner. A glimmer of hope, though, beckons to humanity.

Right after the Torah finishes telling us of Cain's seven generations of descendants -- indeed, immediately after Lemech's disastrous pronouncement of "seven-seven times vengeance" -- the Torah tells us something fascinating. We hear of a second chain of generations, which begins with the birth of a child named Shet (see Genesis 4:25). Shet was a third son born to Eve, a son born after Cain killed Abel, and the text tells us that Shet, in Eve's mind, constituted a replacement of sorts for her murdered son, Abel (see 4:25). Interestingly, the list of Shet's descendants is introduced with the words: These are the generations of Adam -- as if to say, somehow, that these are the real generations of Adam. And they really are. After all, Abel was murdered and had no children. Cain's children are wiped out after seven generations in the great flood. It is really only this last child, Shet, who allows the generations of Adam to continue in perpetuity. For, as the verses go on to tell us, Noah -- the saving remnant of humanity -- is a descendant of Shet.

Strangely, as you begin to go through them, the descendants of Shet sound a lot like the descendants of Cain. For example, Cain has a descendant named Metushael, and Shet has a descendant named Metushelech. Cain has a child by the name of Chanooch; and Shet has a descendant by the same name. Curiously, Shet's immediate offspring is a child named "Enosh," a word which has come to mean "man," and the child of Enosh is Keinan -- a word which seems a variation on Kayin/Cain. It is as if Shet's own line of heirs contains a mirror of Adam himself; and a mirror of Adam's son, Cain.

Well, it can't come as too much of a surprise that, seven generations after Enosh, this second Adam -- we are greeted with the birth of a child named... you guessed it, Lemech. (3) In case you missed the point, this second Lemech just happens to live to the ripe old age of -- seven hundred and seventy-seven years. So, when all is said and done, at seven generations, each line -- the line of Adam I and Adam II -- come to their apex. But whereas the first Lemech gives birth to Tuval Kayin, a son who becomes a partner in the destruction of life, the second Lemech gives birth to a son who will allow for the perpetuation of life. The child of Lemech II is a man by the name of Noah.
While the three sons of Lemech I die in a flood, the child of Lemech II builds an ark. And yet, while the children of Lemech I perish in that flood, the legacy of Lemech I is not erased entirely. One of his children, according to the sages, survives. According to the Midrash, Na'amah -- the sister of Tuval-Kayin -- becomes the wife of Noah.

So a daughter of Lemech I survives by marrying the son of Lemech II. In that union, humanity comes full circle. The doomed line of Cain merges with a spark of life from Shet -- the man who, according to Eve, was a replacement for Abel. At long last, the legacies of Cain and "replacement Abel" have come together, as a father from one line and a mother from the other unite to create Noah.

When we look back on Cain and his legacy, it is easy to disregard him; to feel that mankind is better off without having to deal with the wickedness he manifests. But evidently, Abel -- or his replacement -- is not enough of a foundation upon which to build a New World. Cain, for all the danger he brings to the table, is a necessary partner. Somehow, mankind needs the energies of both Cain and Abel -- ground, coupled with nothingness; possession, bound together with breath -- to move on, to build itself in perpetuity. And so it is that -- in the personhood of Noah and Naama -- under the life-saving roof of an ark, a fragmented humanity finally gains a semblance of unity, just as the storm-clouds of apocalypse gather on the horizon.

Author Biography:

Rabbi Fohrman is resident scholar at the Hoffberger Foundation for Torah Studies. He has taught Biblical Themes as an adjunct professor at the Johns Hopkins University, and has served as a senior editor on ArtScroll's Schottenstein Edition of the Talmud. He is currently spending a year in Israel, consulting for Israel's Ministry of Education. His lectures are available on cassette and MP3 at [www.jewishexplorations.com](http://www.jewishexplorations.com)