

RH Day 2, 2016

Adam and Eve: Adult Learners

Today, I want to share with you a way of approaching the New Year that is dear to my heart and that, I hope will be meaningful to you as well. It is rooted in the Creation narrative we read this morning, and in a very particular interpretation of the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. This interpretation and the approach to the New Year that I'm suggesting, is about Torah learning and its ripple effects. To set the stage, I begin with a famous quote about Eden by the Argentinian writer, Jorge Luis Borges who said: "*I have always imagined that paradise will be a kind of library.*" I love this image of paradise as a place filled with books and, I assume, filled with endless time to read and study.

Borges, however, was not the first to conceive of Paradise in this way. Hundreds of years before him, the rabbis of the Talmud gave us a vision of Olam ha ba – of the World to Come, that included a library and a room filled with students. Their vision was of a great Yeshiva, where those who are worthy, merit the right to sit all day studying Torah.

I recognize that this vision of Paradise might not be everyone's "cup of tea." Perhaps combined with a bit of golf, a bit of biking or even gardening it could begin to feel like Paradise, right? The thing is this: all we know about Eden from the Torah, is that Adam and Eve were responsible for tilling and tending the Garden; that there were many fruit trees there – all of which they could eat from, *except* from the Tree of Knowledge. What we also know is that despite this prohibition, Adam and Eve eat couldn't resist taking a bite from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge.

I think there is much we can learn from this story. It's fascinating that Adam and Eve –two grown adults, are somehow incapable of following God's command to refrain from eating from the Tree of Knowledge! It seems that the first lesson this story is teaching us is that the appetite for knowledge is strong and instinctive.

And once Adam and Eve have eaten from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, they see themselves differently. The Torah tells us: *the eyes of both of them were opened and they perceived that they were naked, and they sewed together fig leaves and made themselves*

loincloths.” Adam and Eve become aware of their nakedness and feel vulnerable. And what do they do? They cover themselves up and hide from God.

In their response we learn another important lesson about seeking knowledge as adults. Like Adam and Eve, we too feel vulnerable, naked, and sometimes even ashamed when we take that first bite from the Tree of Knowledge and explore what is unfamiliar to us. And often we deal with this feeling of vulnerability by taking defensive measures –by covering up, even hiding.

And here the story of Adam and Eve teaches us another lesson. The Torah tells us that God makes garments of skin for Adam and Eve and clothes them. It’s a beautiful way of expressing the idea that we too can find mentors who will recognize our vulnerability and help us move forward, without shame.

But before any of this is possible we must first identify -with courage and humility, those places we long to explore. Perhaps it’s the world of Torah where many of us feel like novices as compared to the vast expertise we have in our secular fields. We might have dismissed Torah study when we were first exposed to it or maybe the opportunity wasn’t there in the first place.

As if responding to these situations, the rabbis offer us an inspiring verse from Isaiah that compares Torah to water. The verse says: “Everyone that is thirsty, come to the waters.” (Isaiah 55:1). Explaining this verse, the rabbis tell us: “as when thirsty, a grown man is not ashamed to say to a child: “Let me have a drink of water” so too in studying Torah an unlearned grown man should not be ashamed to say to a child, “teach me a chapter,” “teach me a verse, “teach me a word” even “teach me a single letter.” (Song R. 1:2)

As some of you might know, this teaching describes quite accurately my own situation. I learned Hebrew and Torah as an adult –when I joined an adult Bat mitzvah class. The first time our class came together we each described our Torah background, or lack thereof –that was my case. When the class was over one of the participants approached me and in a very friendly tone said: “I am so glad you’re in the class. I was prepared to stick it out as long as I wasn’t the one in the group who knew the least!” She was totally open about how vulnerable she felt and somehow, had figured out that because I was so desperate to learn, I had overcome my own sense of

inadequacy. I could have never imagined that years later I, myself, would be helping others study Torah – including preparing a group of amazing adults for their b'nai mitzvah -coming up in just a few weeks.

I recognize, however, that each of us has his or her own particular way of engaging with our tradition, which might or might not involve chanting Torah. And not only that, *how* we learn is also different for each of us. The traditional way of studying in pairs, in a big study hall, with people shouting across the table, is not for everyone. Remember – that's the rabbi's vision of paradise!

Our vision might be something entirely different. Our vision might be more like biking while listening to a podcast. I say this because lately, I've been asked on numerous occasions to recommend this type of learning -podcasts with Jewish content! So, I was delighted to see that the latest issue of Moment magazine offers a list of the top ten Jewish podcasts –from Torah study to history, humor and more. I brought this list with me along with something a bit more old fashioned: a list of the one hundred *books* that are “a must read” to be considered “Jewishly” literate – at least according to one scholar, Professor Larry Hoffman.

Why, you might ask, do I focus on Torah learning on Rosh Hashanah? There is a rabbinic teaching that says that the study of Torah is more important than anything else. Even more important than deeds! And the reason for this, according to the rabbis, is that Torah leads to doing *mitzvot*. The *mitzvot* are indeed our end goal but when we get there through Torah study we achieve two things: we broaden our understanding of the *mitzvot* expected of us and hopefully, this translates into expanding the good we do in the world. And secondly, we nurture the source of our inspiration, and in this way we ensure that our motivation for doing *mitzvot* won't run dry.

Adam and Eve were told that if they ate of the Tree of Knowledge, they would die. So why did they do it? Why did they give up immortality in favor of wisdom and learning? Because the only form of immortality available to *us* is through the impact of our deeds. And by studying Torah we allow our tradition to guide us towards our best selves and to nurture us along the way.

May this year be a year of growth – in learning and in *mitzvot* and may it bring us, and our loved ones many wonderful blessings. Shanah tova u'metukah.

