

# THE OLDEST LESSON IN HISTORY

*by Rabbi Label Lam*

The man said, "The woman that You gave to be with me - she gave me of the tree and I ate."  
(Breishis 3:12)

...that You gave to be with me...Evident here is a lack of gratitude. (Rashi)

So Hashem G-d banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the soil from which he was taken.  
(Breishis 3:23)

You don't know what you've got till it's gone. You take paradise and put up a parking lot. (Joni Mitchell)

There are few important rules about what we call "punishments". 1) They are never strictly punitive but are also somehow rehabilitative. There's always a cure for something mixed in with the soup of misery. 2) The punishment fits the crime in a manner of measure for measure. There's a poetic justice implied in every Divine sentence. 3) What seems like a retributive reaction is really a mechanical effect caused by the misdeed. If a person puts his hand in fire he is automatically burnt.

Where do we see some of these ingredients active in the story of man's mishap in the Garden of Eden? Why was expulsion his just desert? A wealthy family raised an orphan in their home from infancy until early adulthood. His treatment and style of living was absolutely equal to the other siblings in the family. He wore the same elegant clothing and ate the same gourmet food as they. One day a poor man came to the door of this wealthy man. A deep chord of sympathy was struck within the wealthy man. So he gave to him one hundred gold coins.

The poor fellow was so shocked. He had never been given such a huge sum. One gold coin would have sufficed but such a demonstration of generosity uncorked a fountain of appreciation. The man started to praise his benefactor with every benevolent phrase.

He continually showered blessings and good wishes even as he exited. Still afterwards his voice could be heard ringing in the streets as it faded into the night.

The wife turned to her husband and remarked on what a stunning display of gratitude they had just witnessed. She then addressed the phenomena that this fellow with a single donation could not stop saying thanks and is probably still singing praises as he sits in his home. In contrast, the orphan, who has been the beneficiary of kindness worth much more, has never once offered even a hint of thankfulness.

The moment the husband grasped her meaning, he called over the orphan boy who had been a member of their household for so many years, and pointed him to the door. He held his head low and left. The days to follow were a bitter example of how brutal life can be "out there".

Without food and shelter he was forced to take the lowest job. He slept on the floor where he worked from day to late night. The first few days of work were just to pay his rent and only then could he afford a drop of food. For weeks he struggled and suffered just barely subsisting, and all the while looking longingly back at the blessed and dainty life he left behind.

At a calculated time the wealthy man sent for the boy to be returned to his former status within the family. However, now, having gone through what he had, he thanked his host constantly for every bit of goodness and percolated continuously with the joy of genuine appreciation.

As a nation and as individuals we have all witnessed this pattern and experienced it too many times. The key to holding a blessing is appreciation. Without that attitude of gratitude the weight of the goodness that surrounds a man pushes him into exile till he is ready to gratefully surrender. This is only the most fundamental, oft repeated, and the oldest lesson in history.

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