

A WALK IN THE GARDEN

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

In the beginning G-d created differences, separation, and the possibility of conflict. In the beginning, G-d created goodness, freewill, a serpent, and the possibility of sin. In the beginning G-d seemed to have set us up for the distinct possibility of failure.

This notion of "being set up" by G-d is not the typical or desired image that we want to have of how Hashem deals with us. We would like to believe that G-d created an even playing field on which to play the game of choice, rather than handicapping us with the inevitability of failure. We would like to believe that we are capable of perfection rather than accept the reality of, "There can not be a completely righteous man who never does wrong". From a theological point of view we are more comfortable blaming ourselves for our own failures rather than blaming Hashem for orchestrating the events leading up to our failures. Yet, the story of Adam and Chava in Gan Eden, the serpent and the tree of knowledge, a delectable fruit, hard labor, and the sweat of our brow, appears to have been a set up. Why did G-d do this to us?

The Torah is trying to teach us a lesson about ourselves, our relationship with each other, our relationship with G-d, and about reality. As individually created beings we crave the right to do as we please. As independently created beings we desire to be self-centered and self-serving. As intelligently created beings we rationalize the primacy of human need over divine instruction and command. That is why the story of Gan Eden is predicated on the human's inability to adhere to the single divine commandment "not to eat of the fruit of the forbidden tree in the center of the garden". So long as Chava and Adam were ignorant of the tree's uniqueness and purpose as "the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Bad", they did not desire to taste the forbidden fruit. However, from the moment that the "Nachash - serpent" informed Chava of the tree's purpose, woman's agile and aggressive intellect rationalized why they didn't have to listen to G-d's commandment.

Knowledge is potentially dangerous because it opens up for us the vista of possibility. Never show a child the possibilities of T.V. and he will be perfectly content to play within the limits of his own imagination. Never advertise the advantages of microwave technology and we are content to warm-up leftovers in the oven. Never know what the Jones's are doing and we would be content to stay home on vacation and drive a 12 year old car. The blissful ignorance of what could be protects us from the desire to rationalize what should be.

The fact that Chava "then gave Adam to eat of the forbidden fruit" revealed the social desire of the

human to share with each other both the good and the bad. Although independently created, "it is not good for the human to dwell alone". We crave being with each other and sharing with each other. Chava wished to share her experience with her helpmate and Adam wanted to follow Chava's lead and be accepted by her. However, Hashem's intent was for each of us to share with each other the joy and discovery of His reality and goodness as manifest within the limitless boundaries of nature, not to seek out new avenues for self expression and sharing. If we had simply "worked and safekept the garden" we would have been content and happy. Our need for loving social engagement would have been satisfied by challenging each other to better comprehend G-d and His purpose for creating the universe. We could have engaged each other in an eternal adventure of spiritual discovery and sharing that would have exhausted every human craving and desire. The world was His garden, and we were His chosen guardians. Within the limits of a single restriction we were granted carte-blanc to revel in G-d's magnificent world. It was truly "a reflection of the world to come," when the righteous will be engaged in the eternal adventure of spiritual and intellectual discovery.

The story of Gan Eden is the story of reality. It reveals the magnificence and responsibility of being created "in the image of the G-d". It stages the challenges to human potential to grow within the limitless boundaries of G-d's world, or be restricted to the pitifully limited reaches of our own desires. We were offered the choice between the freedom of G-d's beneficence, or the prison of providing for ourselves by the sweat of our brow. We could have raised our children with ease and joy in a paradise setting by modeling for them devotion to Hashem and the endless benefits to be had by listening to His commandments. Instead, we chose to be independent of G-d and struggle with our own inadequacies. G-d did set us up. He wanted us to see our shortcomings and confront our rationalizations. He wanted to humble us so that we recognize that true fulfillment is to be found in simply listening to each and every single commandment.

It was never intended for us to live in Gan Eden. It was intended that we make our world into a Gan Eden. In spite of the sweat of our brow and the pain of child rearing, we acknowledge and praise our dependency upon G-d's benevolence and love. Man might be destined to sin and fail, but he is equally capable of Teshuva and success. The serpents of the real world are both within us and outside of us. As individuals, and as a society we are challenged to recognize the freedom of discipline and the imprisonment of unbridled desire. Selfishness, self-centeredness and ego are "the most cunning of all G-d's creations", and it is our mission to channel passion into devotion and desire into service. The ultimate test of our success or failure in our relationship with G-d will be whether we hide in shame or stand proud when we hear the "sound of G-d walking in the garden".

Good Shabbos.

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