

Eve and Cain

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

We have started the annual cycle of reading the Torah. Every year I come to a familiar, beloved text and invariably see something new. The Bible can be read, sung, looked at numerically, literarily, mystically, and academically. In our cultural world we tend to focus on reading a text and we ignore the sounds of the words and the way repetitions intentionally convey ideas to those listening to them around the camp fire so to speak.

Here is an example where I believe the sounds of two words convey a completely new way of understanding an ancient text. It is a comparison between Eve's encounter with the serpent and Cain's encounter with sin.

Some religious traditions or theologies take what happened to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden to mean that humans were subsequently inherently bad and only Divine Grace could offer them a way out. Others see it as one example of how human beings make mistakes and are forced to face the consequences. The main Jewish position on sin is that there is a constant, fluid struggle between the *yetzer hatov* and the *yetzer hara*, the tendency to do good and the tendency to do bad. In Genesis 9:21 this tendency is described as coming into humans during their youth, rather than birth. Even so, poor Eve gets the blame for everything.

Males have subjugated females long before the Bible. But as the foundation text of all monotheistic religions, it shares with ancient Greek culture the blame for the way women were regarded as subject to males and, in many places in our world today, continue to be. The text as read superficially condemns females to a secondary, dependent role.

In the Genesis narrative, the serpent is the worst offender; he gets to crawl on his stomach, find his food in the dust, and be locked into a permanent hate relationship with humanity. Eve, who is next in line, gets nine months of pregnancy and the pain of childbirth and will be ruled over by her husband. Adam is told that he will have to work hard daily to produce bread by the sweat of his brow. This is all a metaphorical explanation for certain painful natural facts of life, as well as the interaction with nature. There are some things we can change and others that we cannot.

In the transliterated Hebrew of Eve's punishment it says, "VeEl iyshech **teshukatech**, veHu yimshol bach," "Your desire will be towards your man and he will rule over you." (Genesis 3:16) The Hebrew root word for *desire* is **TESHuKA** and the word for *rule* is **MSHL**. The capitals indicate the root of the word which is its essential meaning, devoid of gender. And on the surface this explains why women were regarded for so long as subservient, dependent, less intelligent and less capable.

But there is a fascinating parallel in the language used of Eve to that used of Cain. Two words resonate to create, in my view, a message that only

listening to the repetition of sounds conjures up.

Cain originated the idea of sacrifice. But he gave God "some of the produce of the land." Whereas his younger brother Abel gave "the firstborn of his flock and the fattest" (Genesis 4:3-4). God accepted Abel's sacrifice rather than Cain's. Cain was angry and felt rejected. God responded by saying, "Why are you angry? If you do the right thing it will be accepted. But if you do not to the right thing, then sin will lie across your door, **it will desire you but you can rule over it** [overcome or master it]." (4:7) Here the two core Hebrew words applied to Eve are used of Cain: "Lapetach chataat rovetz, eylecha **teshukato** veata **timshol** bo." Cain is told, "You do not have to become dependent on sin, much as it may attract, desire you or you may desire it, but you can withstand sin, overcome that tendency towards it, that state of mind."

The Hebrew usage for *desire* **TESHuKA** in the Cain narrative mirrors the one in the Eve narrative, even though it is used of sin desiring Cain rather than Cain desiring sin. Remember that someone hearing the words (and this text was mainly heard by people for thousands of years before everyone had access to a written text) would immediately recognize the similarity, the resonance, the music of the sounds, and therefore of the message.

The same goes for the word for *rule* **tiMSHoL**. This idea of *rule* is also used to describe man's role in regard to nature. In Genesis 1:28 God tells man and woman that their responsibility is to *rule* over the animal world. But there the Hebrew root word is **RaDAH**—one used later to describe Pharaoh's cruel treatment of the Israelite slaves. It is a different and much harsher word than **MSHL**. I have come to feel that the word **MSHL** means the less offensive word *responsibility*, rather than rule. A kind of social contract that gives the female protection while pregnancy makes her vulnerable. After all, it is there immediately after talking about the length and pain of pregnancy. But it does not necessarily mean that this is a permanent condition. It could be changed if desired [sic].

This traditional idea that women are supposed to be dependent on men can be understood in two ways. It could be intrinsic and necessary, or it could be simply social conditioning and therefore contingent and not necessary. Perhaps we can understand this statement of female "dependency" in quite a different way.

Since these crucial words are identical in their roots, and the sound of them resonates, it makes sense to suggest that the message intended is similar in both narratives.

The condition of dependency can be negative as well as positive. Like children continuing to be dependent into adulthood. Even if sometimes it is necessary or preferred, the ideal is not permanent. Rather one should try to overcome this dependency and not let it rule. If Cain is told to overcome dependency and tendency towards sin, so Eve has to try to overcome the dependency on man, particularly if such dependency impedes her self-development. Either after her vulnerability is over or in general, she should strive for her own independent identity. If she sacrifices some of her

dependency temporarily or initially, this need not, indeed ought not, to be permanent. In parallel, Adam is required to sacrifice some of his independence in order to accommodate and provide for Eve.

By repeating similar sounding core words in both texts, the Torah is asserting that this subordinate state need not and ought not to be permanent. It is true, implies the Torah, that women have and still do suffer certain disadvantages, whether for physical or cultural/social reasons. But it need not always be thus. One should want to express one's individuality before man and God. This is the ideal we should strive for.

You might ask why, if this so, the law in matters primarily of ritual and, to a much lesser extent, in terms of status seems in tradition to give women fewer rights than men. Although I can think of just two examples in civil law—divorce and evidence—in ritual there are virtually two parallel worlds.

I would argue that this is what our inadequacy as men, our original sin so to speak, has imposed on women. But those who feel this should be free to rebel against and try to overcome any disabilities. Not necessarily by modifying the male modalities, but rather by asserting the specific religious needs and identities of women. And if the law then still discriminates in any way, it is indeed up to our authorities to face the issues, instead of throwing up their hands and claiming there is nothing they can do. The Torah empowers them and encourages them to act. But, of course, it all depends on how you read, understand, or hear the original written and oral text.

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Note: After years of reluctance, I've decided to experiment with a pilot "conversation" podcast. The format will be for a moderator to present topics or questions to me and I will discuss them while engaging in a conversation with a moderator and/or guests and then we will post and distribute them.

I have been fortunate in that Michael Deutsch has been instrumental in helping me with my site altogether and has offered to help gather the topics and questions for this pilot. He's currently taking suggestions. If you have anything you would like to ask or have discuss, please send him an email to michael(at)4thbin.com. Your input goes only to him, and he will withhold names. So don't be shy.