

# Genesis and Marshmallow

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I was reminded of the famous Marshmallow Experiment last week when I read that Dr. Walter Mischel had died on September 12th at the age of 88. When he was a professor at Stanford, he carried out an experiment on children that became one of the most influential psychological tests, even though over time it has been challenged for its narrow methodology.

In the study, children were given a choice either to have one small reward immediately or to wait several minutes in order to receive two such rewards. In other words, if one could delay gratification, the reward would be greater. Some went for immediate gratification and got less. Others were able to hold out and got more. Some struggled. Others seemed naturally to understand the benefit of waiting. Later studies followed up the children and found that those who were able wait longer tended to do better in life, in terms of educational standards, successful jobs, and fulfilling partnerships.

Among other things, the tests were criticized for focusing on too narrow a segment of the population (namely the children of Stanford faculty). But a variety of other subsequent tests have borne out the connection between self-control, deferred gratification, and relative success in life. Though that too is an uncertain and ill-defined metric.

Yet as we start reading the Torah cycle again with Genesis, this issue not so much delaying gratification, but the ability to exercise self-control, seems to be one of the most important underlying themes. Critics often criticize religion for its rituals and petty restrictions, without realizing that there are important benefits. (Though I do agree that too much discipline can have negative side effects. Neurosis and narrow-mindedness are as much a feature of religions as the grand, ethical, and spiritual messages.) How often does the Torah say something like, "Enjoy, have a good time, but know there are limitations and restrictions too." Why is this message of control so important?

Let's start with Eve. The first example of disobedience and a typical case of giving in to self-indulgence. Like a child who does not want to wait to hear any good reason not to stuff its mouth with chocolate. Had she waited to consult her partner Adam, she might have had the information to respond to temptation. To hear what the actual command was, not just the tempter's version. Anything to justify doing what one wants to do. But no, the fruit, the marshmallow, had to be eaten right away.

The Divine response makes the point. In the Garden of Eden everything was provided. Life was easy. Indulgent. Afterwards it was hard, backbreaking. There was pain. Food has to be eked out of the earth and came with time, patience, and delayed gratification. That is the basis of morality—hold off, don't grab.

Cain follows a similar path. He expects his slapdash, rather careless offering of the leftovers, "some of the fruit of the earth", to be acceptable. Abel, on the other hand, offered the best. God told Cain not to be upset at the rejection but to try harder, and then he would succeed. But being a sort of earlier version of a someone who cannot take rebuffs or rebukes and reacts violently, or just a spoilt bad-tempered child, Cain reacted by lashing out and killing his brother. That is one version of the story. There are plenty of other ones. Such as a struggle for mastery of the universe and the different ways of achieving that goal. The quickest, least controlled is by war. On the other hand, the slower, but in the long term more effective, is by peaceful expansion.

There is the highly obscure story of Lemech. He had two wives. Had he overstepped the mark, if one was enough for Adam? Was he greedy? And was that why he killed someone and came to realize that he would suffer as a result, just as Cain did? His line would come to an end, because, like Cain's, it was built on an absence of self-control. There were consequences.

Then the Sons of the Judges just grabbed whatever women they felt like. That unrestrained sexual abuse was the final straw. The text says, "And God saw how much evil man was doing on earth and that his thoughts were evil all day long." (Genesis 6:5) What does that mean?

One way of seeing it is that humanity is naturally selfish, grasping, and incapable of restraint. "Original Sin" as the Christians call it. The opposite of Rousseau's Noble Savage—pure, before society corrupts them. Human nature, before nurture destroys innocence.

After the flood, Noah and his family are given the task of rebuilding human society. God decides that vague statements of how to behave were not enough. One needed a legal structure. Morality required a system to describe and enforce it. Making man in the image of God meant having constraints (Genesis 9:6). Delaying gratification is a Divine quality.

"And God said to Himself, 'I will not continue to curse the earth because of humankind, because there is a **tendency in the heart of humans** that is bad from youth.'" (Genesis 8:21) The Hebrew word for tendency is *yeytzer*. According to tradition, we humans have two tendencies that are constantly in conflict with each other, rather like Freud's idea of the id, the ego, and the superego. The *yeytzer hatov* the good inclination, versus the *yeytzer hara*, the bad one.

Obviously the good one is usually and overwhelmingly the voice of self-control. Don't grab it all for yourself. Think of others, think of the consequences, think of the options, and thus think of the long-term benefits. Whereas the bad inclination is the one that says, "No, I want it now. I must have it. I deserve it, and to hell with the consequences. Why suffer now for gravy later? Why work hard at college for benefits later?"

Noah's rainbow reminds us of this covenant with God. The restrictions that are part of our tradition are designed to help our good inclination win over the bad. We are not intrinsically evil or good. We are constantly battling.

Sometimes the good side of us wins. Other times it loses. None of us is always one or the other. We just need to make sure the good side wins more often.