

# Adam and Eve

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

It is Adam and Eve time again in the annual Torah reading cycle. It always reminds me of Sin! Original Sin! What unpleasant words. What awful baggage. I won't deny that many human beings do horrible things and qualify as sinners. Still, the word sin in English a very negative one. I really dislike the English word, much more than the Hebrew. The Hebrew is so much more nuanced and layered.

In Biblical Hebrew the words used are *Cheyt*, which literally means to miss the mark, *Aveyrah*, to wander off the path. *Avon* is to have failed and *Pesha* is to have neglected an action or a person. We do all of these, even the apparently most holy of us. As the Bible (Ecclesiastes 7.20) explicitly says, 'There is no righteous person on earth who does only good and not sin.' Doing something wrong does not in itself make you a bad person. If you have done something wrong, you need to do is to rectify it and determine not to do it again. Then you get on with your life. You can become a good person again.

Western culture, influenced by various strains of Greek philosophy considers the physical to be subservient to the mental. In contrast, the Biblical attitude is holistic and integrated. Influenced by Greece, Christianity and Western culture considered physical beings to be automatically inferior, in a state of sin ever since 'The Fall of Man' and 'Original sin.'

The origin of disobedience, in both Judaism and Christianity, goes back to the Bible. God planted two special trees in the Garden of Eden, the Tree of Life, and the Tree of Knowledge Good and Bad (Genesis 2.9). When Adam was told that he may eat whatever fruit he liked except from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge Good and Bad (Genesis 2.17) which he was specifically commanded not to eat that. In Chapter 3, the serpent succeeded in convincing Eve to eat and she persuaded Adam to eat it too.

There is no mention in the text of what the fruit was. It might well have been guava, a kiwi, or perhaps a passion fruit. Christianity thinks it was an apple only because the Latin for evil is 'malum' and coincidentally so is the word for apple. Put the two together and there you have it. But the sort of apples we know of nowadays were not yet imported into the Middle East so many thousands of years ago. The goldens Apples of Hesperides of mythology, were oranges if anything! That is why in Hebrew an orange is called *tapuz*, short for *tapuach zahav*, a golden apple!

So what was it? The Talmud (Brachot 40a) suggests the fruit was the vine because nothing brings trouble to a person more than wine. Another view was that it was a fig. They were clothed with the leaves of the very tree they sinned through. Even stranger is the theory that it was wheat because it was the most basic of foods or because it was planted 'naked' and ended up clothed in husks).

I have always loved the poet Milton's theory in 'Paradise Lost' that Adam only ate out of his love for Eve and wanted to share whatever her fate would be. I am a romantic. They were both punished nevertheless. Life was tough outside the Garden of Eden. No mention of Original Sin.

How then do we explain why humans do wrong? In Genesis 6.5, the text says there is a tendency (Yetzer) in the heart of mankind to do bad all the time. But after the flood, it says that "There is a tendency in the heart of man that is evil from his youth" in Genesis 8.21. It is youth, arrogance, selfishness rather than birth, rather than instinct, which is the source of evil. This seems to be the mainstream view in Judaism, and it is very different than the idea of 'The Fall of Man' and 'Original Sin.'

Yet, as with so many theological concepts in the Talmud, you will find the opposite idea there too. The very act of disobeying God from the first sin onwards is what goes on impacting negatively on humanity. It can be found in several places such as in Brachot 4b and Sanhedrin 98b.

The most radical idea about sin in Judaism comes from the Kabbalah and thence into Chassidism. One needs to sin, to fall before one can rise. Which led to several false messiahs making an issue of breaking the law to make the point.

In some ways, things seem to be getting worse. Advanced technologies kill many more innocent human beings. Even in civilized countries, the amount of brutal torture, rape, and murder are still pervasive. Children are kidnapped and used for unspeakable things and then killed. The world can seem like a pretty sick place. The Christian attitude that we are born basically evil is sometimes very appealing. Yet at the same time, we do so much good and there is a vast reservoir of charitable creativity. Goodness needs to be explained as much as evil does.

Judaism retains a basic optimism, or at least neutrality, about human nature. That is why I associate the nasty word 'sin' more with other religions. However, I have heard enough Jewish hellfire and brimstone preachers not know that you can find all kinds of strange attitudes alive and flourishing amongst us.

Judaism is not a monolithic structure of ideas, thank goodness. But then the question is whether one's attitude to sin reflects the way one has been brought up and educated or whether it is the result of genetic makeup. Are

some people more naturally inclined towards living a good, religious life or a bad one? Nature or Nurture? Chromosomes, pathologies, or physical deficiencies? On balance I am on the side of education.