

# Sin

It is Adam and Eve time again in the annual Torah reading cycle and that always reminds me of Sin! Original Sin! What unpleasant words. What awful baggage. I won't deny that lots of people do lots of awful things and the word "sin" often describes these things. But still I find the word in English a very negative word, I recoil from it. I resent it. And here is my point; I dislike the English word much more so than the Hebrew.

In Biblical Hebrew the words are "cheyt", which literally means "to miss the mark", or "aveirah", which is "to wander off the path", or "pesha" which is "to have failed to do something". We do sin, every one of us, even the apparently most holy of us. As the Bible (Ecclesiastes 7:20) explicitly says, "There is no righteous man 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 then all you need to do is to rectify it and determine not to do it again and then get on with your life.

But in Western culture, influenced of course by various strains of Christianity, "sin" is associated with a "state of sin" that all we humans are in and have been in automatically ever since "The Fall of Man". So much of Western culture, literature and music, is devoted to "The Fall", of man and indeed Satan, that these concepts are virtually taken for granted.

The origin of the idea of sin, in both Judaism and Christianity, goes back to the Bible. God plants two special trees in the Garden of Eden, the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge Good and Bad (Genesis 2:9). Actually, the text itself is ambiguous as to whether there are two trees or only one that includes both knowledge and life. I like the idea that they are one and the same; a good life is knowing how to live. But that is another issue. When Adam is put in the Garden of Eden, he is told that he may eat whatever fruit he likes except the fruit of the tree of Knowledge Good and Bad (Genesis 2:17).

Chapter 3 of Genesis describes what Christianity calls "The Fall". The serpent, knows that Adam has told Eve about the forbidden fruit, and Eve tells him that Adam has told her not even to touch it. I should point out that there is no mention in the text of what the fruit was. It might well have been a kiwi or perhaps a passion fruit. Christianity says it was an apple only because the Latin for evil is "malum" and coincidentally so is the word for apple. So put the two together and there you have it.

But the sort of apples we know were not yet imported into the middle east. The Apples of Hesperides were oranges if anything! That is why in Hebrew an orange is called "tapuz", short for tapuach zahav, a golden apple! The Talmud (Brachot 40a) suggests the fruit was a grape, only a drunk would be so stupid, a fig, they were clothed with the leaves of the tree they sinned through, or wheat because it is the most basic of foods (or because it is planted "naked" and ends up clothed like them). Anyway, I digress.

She eats and he eats. I confess I have always loved Milton's theory in Paradise Lost that he only ate out of his love for her and desire to share whatever her fate would be. Yes, I am a romantic, and off I go digressing yet again.

So they are punished. Life will be tough outside the Garden of Eden. No mention of Original Sin. So how then do we explain the evil that humans do? In Genesis 6.5, the text says there is a tendency (Yetzer) in the thoughts of the heart of mankind; this is the basis of the idea that humans have two tendencies—to do good, the Yetzer HaTov, and to do bad, the Yetzer HaRa. Life is a constant struggle between them. After the Flood, the text in Genesis 8.21 is specific, "There is a tendency in the heart of man that is evil from his youth." So it is youth rather than birth, experience 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 idea that the first sin goes on impacting on humanity can be found in several places (Brachot 4b, Sanhedrin 98b).

What is the source of the evil that exists in our world? In some ways it seems to be getting worse. Advanced technologies kill many more innocent human beings. Even in civilized countries, the amount of brutal torture, rape, and murder is 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.

Despite everything, 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 to know that you can find all 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, a religious life or a bad one? Nature or Nurture? Chromosomes or Choirs? I am on the side of education.