

Sin? Not such a big deal.

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Next week we will restart the annual Torah reading cycle and that always reminds me of Sin! Adam and Eve and all that. What an unpleasant word. What awful baggage. Many people do bad things. They sin. But I still find the English word to be very negative. I recoil from it. And I dislike the English word much more than the Hebrew.

In Biblical Hebrew, the words are *Cheynt* ('to miss the mark'), *Aveyrah*, ('to wander off the path'), *Avon* (neglect) or *Pesha* ('to have failed to do something'). We all sin. Even the 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.

Western culture, literature, music, and art are all influenced by various strains of Christianity. The origin of the idea of sin, in both Judaism and Christianity, goes back to the Bible. In the Book of Genesis God planted two special trees in the Garden of Eden: The Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge. Good and Bad. When Adam was put in the Garden of Eden, he was told that he may eat whatever fruit he liked except the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Good and Bad (Genesis 2.17). He was given a command and a choice. We needn't go into the ambiguity of the text here.

Chapter 3 of Genesis describes what Christianity calls 'The Fall'. The serpent engages Eve and asks about the forbidden fruit. Eve tells him that Adam has instructed her to not even touch it. I should point out that there is no mention in the text of what the fruit was. It might have been a kiwi or, perhaps, a passion fruit. Christianity thinks it was an apple 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 of nowadays were not yet imported into the middle east. The Apples of Hesperides, of Greek Mythology were oranges if anything! That is why, in Hebrew, an orange is *tapuz* – short for *tapuach zahav*, a golden apple! The Talmud suggests the fruit was a grape since only a drunk would be so stupid as to defy God. Or a fig because 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). But I digress.

Eve ate and then gave it to Adam to eat. I have always loved Milton's theory

in Paradise Lost that Adam only ate the fruit out of his love for her and a desire to share whatever her fate would be. They were punished. Life will be tough outside the Garden of Eden. But there's no mention of the idea that we are all, inevitably and basically, evil until someone dies for our sins.

The Bible has a rather healthy attitude towards sin. If you've done it, admit it to yourself and to God. Not to a priest or a rabbi. Atone and get on with your life. Atonement for sinning against other humans can only be forgiven if we put it right, determine not to do it again and recompense those we may have deprived of something material. As for God, we can repent at any time. Every day we say a prayer asking for forgiveness. Every New Month is a little Day of Atonement (without fasting). And then, of course, the Ten Days of Repentance are the occasion of national and personal expression of regret and a determination to do better. All the penances we read about in the Kabbalah were late additions to our way of thinking about sin. In the end, when we sin, we let ourselves, as well as God, down. The most difficult part of all is forgiving ourselves for failing to live up to our own standards.

How, then, do we explain the evil that humans do? In Genesis 6.5, the text says there is a tendency in the thoughts of mankind (, the word is *Yetzer*). 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. This idea is repeated after the Flood (Genesis 8:21) "There is a tendency in the heart of man that is evil from his youth." The source of evil is youth rather than birth and experience rather than instinct. This is the mainstream view of Judaism. 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 can find other ideas. Ideas such as the first sin of Adam and Eve continue to impact humanity. Mysticism adds new dimensions. The false Messiah, Shabtai Zvi, said that it is necessary to sin in order to know the difference between good and bad. You can find this idea in Chasidic thought, too.

What is the source of the evil that exists in our world? Even in so-called "civilized" countries, 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.

Despite everything, Judaism retains a basic optimism, or at least neutrality, about human nature. And yet, I have heard enough Jewish hellfire and brimstone preachers to know that you can find all kinds of attitudes alive and flourishing amongst us.

The question remains: Are some people just more naturally inclined towards living a good life and others to a bad one? Does one's attitude to sin reflect the way one has been brought up and educated – or is it the result of genetic makeup? It is probably a combination of them all.