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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

ARE ADAM AND EVE MODERN ORTHODOX ROLE MODELS?

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A healthy religious culture teaches its foundational stories to its children with confidence and without embarrassment. This is a problem for Modern Orthodoxy, which has discomfort teaching the story of Creation. The most immediate and important reason for this is gender. We do not have a shared communal interpretation of the story that squares with how we want our boys and girls to think of themselves, to relate to each other, and to grow up as men and women.

To put this in perspective, think for a moment about the first Rashi on Chumash. He explains that the Torah tells us that G-d created the world in order to secure our right to Eretz Yisroel. For all the moral challenges of Israeli-Palestinian relationships, this remains a powerful and important touchstone for Religious Zionism – G-d gave us this land, and He had a right to do so, because He created it. I myself am very fond of Ramban's caveat that He gave it to us on condition that we deserve it, but the point stands.

Can we find a reading of human creation that plays the same role for our community?

An enormous contribution to that end was made by Rabbi Yehuda Herzl Henkin in the title essay of his book Equality Lost.

Rabbi Henkin begins from my favorite example of biting humble Chazalic wit. Mishnah Avot 1:1 reports that

The Men of the Great Assembly said three things: One should be patient in judgment, stand many students up (as independent thinkers), and build a hedge around the Torah.

"Building a hedge around the Torah" is the justification for most of Rabbinic law, and lesser men would have felt it necessary to guard the source of their authority against mockery. Instead, Chazal (Avot of Rabbi Natan 1:1) engage

in preemptive self-deprecation. Which human being made the first hedge? Adam. What was it? He told Eve that G-d had capitally prohibited not just consumption of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, but even contact with it. What happened as a result? The Snake proved to Eve that contact did not result in death, and she therefore decided that Adam must have lied about consumption as well.

In other words: The first attempt to build a hedge around the Torah led to original sin. But we rabbis go on building them anyway, hopefully having learned from experience how to build them better. What should we have learned?

Rav Henkin notes that this story assumes that Eve had no direct access to G-d's command, which was given to Adam before she came into being. Adam did not legislate together with Eve. He did not discuss with her whether it would be better to avoid all contact with the tree, even though G-d had prohibited only eating its fruit. Instead, he legislated for her. His lack of trust made her vulnerable to the (male) snake. This lack of trust was the true original sin.

In other words: The story of Eden teaches us that men must never seek to impose themselves as necessary intermediaries between G-d and women. The Torah is not in Heaven, nor over the sea, such that women must ask men to go fetch it for them.

The original temptation was that Adam saw knowledge, and especially knowledge of Torah, as a source of power rather than as a gift to be shared. This is a yetzer hora that remains profoundly human, and rabbinic.

Yet in this version of the story, why did Adam eat the fruit? He knew that G-d had not forbidden contact, and should have corrected Eve – perhaps with a supercilious smile – when she came to him with her story.

A romantic answer is that Adam had no interest in immortality without Eve.

A tragic answer is that Adam took responsibility for his error by deliberately sharing her fate.

But neither of these answers fits well with another element of the text. When G-d confronts Adam, he does not express love or atonement. Instead, he blames Eve.

וַיֹּאמֶר הָאָדָם
הָאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר נָתַתָּה עִמָּדִי –
הִוא נָתַתָּה לִּי מִן־הָעֵץ וָאֲכַל:

The man said:

*The woman whom You gave to be with me –
she gave me from the tree, and I ate.*

How can this reaction fit with Rav Henkin's reading?

Or HaChayyim provides what I think is a very productive approach.

ונראה שכוונת האדם היא שלא ידע דבר
כי אם האשה הביאה לפניו המזומן ואכל
ואינו חייב לשאול על המוגש לפניו - דבר זה מנין?
כי הלא כל הארץ לפניו היא מלאה מעדנים אשר נטע ה'
ודקדק לומר "אשר נתת עמדי" –
שלא לחייבו לחפש ולדקדק אחריה לדעת המובא לפניו
כיון שהאשה הלז נתנה ה' עמו לעזר ולהועיל
ואין רע יורד מהשמים
ואין לו לבדוק אחריה, כי מן הסתם מעשיה נאים.

*It seems correct that the intent of the man is that he knew nothing of
the matter
other than that the woman brought before him something ready to eat,
and he ate.*

*He was not obligated to ask about what was set before him – where
would this idea come from?*

*All the land is before him filled with the delights which Hashem had
planted!*

*He was precise in saying "whom You gave to be with me" –
not to obligate him to search and be precise after her to know what
was brought before him.*

*Since this woman was given by Hashem to be with him to help and
be effective,
and no evil descends from Heaven,
and he should not have investigated her deeds, since the default was
that her deeds were fitting.*

The fruit, Or HaChayyim suggests, was not visually distinguishable. Adam had no idea what he was eating! When G-d confronts him, he responds that Eve was vouched for by G-d, and thus surely there was no reason to mistrust her testimony.

So what should Adam have done? One witness is sufficient with regard to prohibitions, such as kashrut. This is true regardless of gender. Indeed, many rishonim say that the basis for the principle that one witness is believed in such matters is that people should be able to trust the kashrut of their spouses and hosts without resorting to halakhic detective agencies.

I suggest that the proper frame for this story is poetic justice. Adam was correct to trust Eve's kashrut; he was wrong to mistrust her maturity and judgment. By refusing to treat her as an equal when conveying the law, he taught her to mistrust him. Once she no longer trusted him, she saw no reason to live up to his trust in her. He was punished not because he trusted her, but because he had mistrusted her.

We should think long and hard about whether that narrative is playing out again today in communal conversations about women and halakhah.

I submit that young men and women who internalize this reading of human creation will seek to build a society in which Torah is always a shared resource, and in which Torah decisions are made collaboratively and transparently to the extent possible. If you agree, and think that this describes the Torah society that you want your children to live in, please share, print, and otherwise disseminate this essay as widely as you can.