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PARADISE LOST OR OUTGROWN?

I

The account of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is certainly the best known story in the Bible and probably the least understood. Unfortunately, for many of us, our first encounter with this story as children was also our last. Our Sages early on believed that this story was a metaphor representing certain profound truths and should not be interpreted literally.¹ How is the modern reader to understand these second and third chapters in the Book of Genesis and what is he to learn therefrom?²

The key to it all, I believe, lies in the perception that this story serves as a bridge between what came before in the text and what comes after. That is to say, chapter one, with its most concise account of the creation including the human species, concludes with the pronouncement: “And God saw everything that he had made and behold it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). Soon after, chapters four and five take place within a setting that reflects the human condition as we know it today—people are born and they die, there is strife and misery, men work hard to sustain themselves and often fail. In short, things do not appear to be “very good”! What had happened in the interim? Surely it was to be expected that a good and wise God would have provided His human creatures with a much kinder and user-friendly environment than that in which, according to the anthropologists, early Man actually found himself. Indeed, was that not implied in the pronouncement that all was “very good”? It is to bridge this gap that we are given in chapters two and three, the story of Adam and Eve in *Gan Eden*.

This story begins with Man having been placed in a “good” place indeed, a veritable paradise that can provide for all his needs, but in the end, the human species finds itself out in the real world, exposed to tough and hostile surroundings, not at all amenable to human needs and concerns.

How and why did this transformation take place?³ The suggestion of the text is that the answer is to be found in the story of Man in *Gan Eden*. This is most clear, if read as a metaphor rather than literally. Of course, if and when a particular text should be seen as metaphor has been and remains a sensitive issue in Biblical exegesis. Used indiscriminately as a general approach, allegory can reduce a practical commandment or an historical account to a mere literary device designed to convey an idea. On the other hand, refusal to recognize the metaphoric nature of certain texts such as the *Gan Eden* story is to deprive oneself of one of the main sources of the wisdom of the Torah.

As I suggested in an earlier study,⁴ the first clue of the possibility of metaphor is that the text, if taken literally, does not inform or illuminate but instead mystifies and obfuscates, and seems to border on the fanciful. On its face, the *Gan Eden* story seems to be dealing with the important issues of “knowledge” and “immortality.” Surely the Torah cannot mean to suggest that these come about as the result of someone eating the fruit of a particular tree! So metaphor is indicated. However, as a coherent story containing action, drama, and a cast of characters as metaphor, it is rather complex. By comparison, for example, to say that the sentence, “The fortification walls reached the heavens” (Deut. 1:28), is a metaphor, means that the walls did not really touch the heavens but only that they were unusually high. However, in the case of a complex story, it is not a particular term or phrase that must be interpreted differently but the entire action, to whom it is attributed, and the relationship between the characters carry a meaning on an altogether different plane. Thus, I shall argue that the crucial element in this story that causes the radical change in the human condition is not what is eaten but the very act of disobedience and the psychological process that brings it about. And while the story focuses on the actions of two individuals, as metaphor it represents changes that took place in the psyche as it evolved over generations in the pre-*homo sapien* period.

Why would the Torah (which term means “teaching” or “instruction”) choose to use metaphor in describing this phase in the creation of Man? After all, metaphor does not inform directly or univocally, but only gives hints and suggestions. Indeed, it is entirely possible to misinterpret the metaphor or even to find it completely mystifying! However, precisely when dealing with a particularly abstruse philosophical and theological subject such as the nature of the human self and the dynamics of free will, there are precious few options. One can follow the advice of a sage, “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be

silent.” However, an apt metaphor can indicate a direction and close out various false alternatives. Its very amenability to different interpretations gives metaphor the flexibility to keep pace with advances in our understanding of ourselves and make sense in different ages. Our *Gan Eden* story is constructed so artfully, that even if earlier generations understood it literally, they were not learning an untruth!

In chronological terms, this story is a flash-back to an earlier phase designed to describe events that occurred before our world had started to function on its own and before the creation of the human species had been completed. In terms of the Biblical time-frame, it was late in the sixth day, before the Shabbat. This means that the human is still a “work in progress,” so that every act performed by this creature or for this creature is helping to define his ultimate nature. And while Man was already experiencing elements in his consciousness, which would later be identified as reason, will, sense of self, emotions, and imagination, the precise extent and nature of the interaction between them were as yet undetermined. So that these early events could be crucial because like “wet cement,” the slightest untoward impact would leave a lasting impression.

According to the story, God places the, as yet, incomplete Man in a Garden of His planting, filled with all sorts of fruit trees that are “desirable to the sight and good for food,” with the mysterious qualification: “But of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat; for on the day you shall eat of it you will surely die” (Gen. 2:17).⁵ Within the context of the story taken literally, the warning is quite clear (certainly this is the way Man and the serpent understand it)—to eat of the fruit of this particular tree is to incur death! But what is the meaning of “knowledge of good and evil”? This could not have been very intelligible to Adam and Eve. Nor is it very clear whether “knowledge of good and evil” was to be considered something desirable or not. On the one hand, “knowledge” sounds attractive to the human mind. However, the presence of the term “evil” is off-putting. The implication is that one eats of the fruit of this tree and acquires some kind of knowledge. Yet, from Genesis 3:6, it does not appear that the gaining of this knowledge was the primary motive in Eve’s eating of the fruit. What is clear is that God has forbidden Man to eat of its fruit. In terms of the metaphor this is the important element.

This very vagueness suggests a story composed as metaphor. What manner of tree is this which finds its place among regular fruit trees and yet whose fruit provides “knowledge” of some kind? The text does not

ascribe any magical or supernatural powers to this tree in order to explain its unusual effect. Furthermore, the text makes no effort to describe the appearance of this tree or its exact location so that Man could steer clear of it. Later, I will suggest that the name given the tree at the very beginning—*ets ha-da'at tov va-ra*—was given *al shem sofo*, to reflect the change that took place in human perception of moral value after primal Man “disobeyed God.” In short, the name given to the tree is appropriately ambiguous, which enables it to be understood differently by those inside the story, those reading it literally, and even those who think they have deciphered the metaphor.

In the meantime, Man develops his cognitive faculties and learns the habits and nature of the garden’s wildlife and is able to “name” and to categorize the different types of fauna, which is to note similarities and differences. As Man becomes aware of his social needs and desire for suitable companionship, God provides him with “Woman,” a human female counterpart, a suitable “helpmeet.”⁶ Presumably, Man conveys to Woman all that God had instructed him as to life in the Garden.

Up to this point, matters seem to have proceeded as planned. Enter the “serpent,” and everything takes an unexpected turn. Of course, there never was and probably never will be a “talking serpent.” We should see the “words” of the serpent as a “voice within the woman.”⁷ That is to say, a “silent conversation” takes place within her consciousness, between her curiosity, her awakened desires and her reason. Let us imaginatively reconstruct how all this might have happened.

The woman is strolling in the Garden, wondering which of the fruits she should have today for lunch, permitting the exotic shapes, the attractive colors, and the familiar aromas to sharpen her appetite. Having already tasted many of them, she is looking for something new when her eyes come to rest on what she had been told was “forbidden.” As she contemplates its tantalizing possibilities, her hunger grows and she falls into a reverie. Talking to herself, her musings take on a dialogical form:

So let us see, why is it again we are not supposed to eat of this tree? Hmm . . . as I recall, I had been told that should we even touch it we shall die! (Gen. 3:3)⁸ Yet, yesterday, I accidentally brushed against it and nothing happened! Adam said something about the tree being a “tree of knowledge.” But why would God wish to keep us from knowledge of any kind? Surely “knowledge” is a good thing! Could it be because we would then become as powerful as God?

The woman now holds the forbidden fruit in her hands, enjoying its fragrance and caressing its texture as she fantasizes how it would taste.

And when the woman saw that the tree was good for eating, that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she ate and gave also to her husband and he did eat (Gen. 3:6).

How are we to judge this act and why did it have the dire consequences attributed to it? It should be noted that the text does not use the usual Hebrew word for "sin" (*het*) in condemning the act.⁹ But, it was, of course, an act of disobedience. The human couple had contravened the command of God and done what they were explicitly told not to do! This was not a moral transgression in the sense that Cain's act of fratricide was. Nevertheless, obedience is generally considered a virtue and disobedience a vice.

However, this is only when the particular command one is to obey is itself morally compelling or when the one issuing the command is in a position which morally obligates. In our case, God's relationship to Man is one of benefactor, a relationship which, according to the story, Man was surely aware of, since God had communicated directly with him. This could be seen in the verse, "And the Lord God took (*va-yikah*) the man and put him into the Garden of Eden" (Gen. 2:15). In explaining the verbosity, Rashi comments, "Took him with pleasant words and persuaded him to enter."¹⁰ Undoubtedly, Man was thus made aware of the bounty and special care he was being given by his Creator and a sense of gratitude must have followed. With all of his needs provided for, it would have been sheer churlishness for Man to have felt a need to eat from the single tree whose fruit he was forbidden to eat by a beneficent God. Furthermore, Man had been given a perfectly good reason not to eat of that particular tree—"For in the day you will eat you will surely die." Thus supporting Man's obedience was both the moral sentiment of gratitude as well as a purely pragmatic consideration.

In this regard, however, Woman's position was quite different. She never had a direct encounter with God, so that for her, God is an abstraction whose command and goodness were only hearsay. For the woman who came into existence in the Garden, her entire situation including the ease of living there was part of the given and taken for granted. She could hardly have known that the Garden was especially planted for them by a caring God.

What were the psychological levers that were brought into play as the woman stood musing before the Tree of Knowledge? Both Man and

Woman already possessed the power of free choice by virtue of their having been created in the “image of God,” which included the ability to reason, make judgements, and trace out means-ends relationships.

At that moment, Woman was experiencing a complex of emotions of growing intensity including hunger, desire and curiosity. Feeding this desire was a fertile imagination that enabled her to fantasize as to how this fruit might taste and what new powers this “knowledge” might unlock. What caused her to hesitate, however, was her reason that reminded her that the tree was not even to be touched lest she “die,” which she presumed was a bad thing. But experience had shown this prediction to be inaccurate, since earlier contact with the tree had resulted in no such thing. In addition, she speculated that God had only wished to frighten them with a false threat to keep them from eating of the tree so that He could keep those powers exclusively for Himself. And so she hesitated no longer.

Unknowingly, Woman had successfully neutralized her faculty of reason, which alone stood in the way of her powerful desire, by discovering and exercising the ability to “rationalize.” This is a process that occurs when raw desire influences the will to enter the reasoning process and offer a “rational but specious explanation.” For God had never said that the day one touches the tree, one would die, so that her earlier experience actually signified nothing. Thus, the Biblical story reveals the Achilles’ heel of the rational process. Although the reasoning may be correct, the premise may be false and so the conclusion will be false.

Of course, this sort of thing happens all the time, even today. The reason it had such fateful consequences in our story is because at that time, human nature was, to an extent, raw, unfixed, and malleable. Because of the nature of the human psyche and its essential freedom, faculties such as reason, emotion, imagination, and sense of self could not have been brought into existence fully formed in sharply demarked compartments. The outer limits of these components and the precise mode of their interaction would take shape gradually under the impact of living experience. Had the precise line of development hinted at in the metaphor not taken place when it did, perhaps Man’s rational faculty might have developed in ways making it more resistant to manipulation by rationalization, and Man’s emotions less responsive to his imagination.

However, because it occurred when it did (“late on the sixth day before Shabbat”), at that crucial juncture in human evolution, when Man’s proto-faculties were already sufficiently developed to be in use but yet raw enough so that improper moves now become permanent

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possibilities for all generations, this event takes on such tragic dimensions. It signifies that much more work would have to be done, much more history would have to ensue before a culture could be developed in which a balance of influences playing upon Man will enable reason, desire, and the moral impulse to work together, so that Man in freedom and with responsibility could choose the good and reject the evil.

II

In order to hint at what happened as a result of eating of the Tree of Knowledge, the description of the event is juxtaposed between two statements, one immediately before and one immediately after:

And they were both naked, the man and his wife and they were not ashamed (Gen. 2:25)

And the eyes of both were opened and they knew (*ve-yad'u*) that they were naked and they sewed fig leaves and made for themselves girdles (Gen. 3:7).

While in Genesis 2:25 the text sums up their indifference to their nakedness by simply saying, "they were not ashamed," the description of the change in Genesis 3:7 does not refer to "shame," but instead says, "they knew that they were naked." This implies that the emotion of shame was seen merely as a symptom of sensitivity to nakedness which itself, however, involves a far more complex cognitive process ("they knew that they were naked"). Animals and small children are not embarrassed by their nakedness nor by many other things that might embarrass an adult human. This is because they lack self-consciousness and a self-image.

However, in the account of the couple's hiding from God after their act of disobedience and their ensuing conversation, there are traces of guilt and embarrassment. So that it would appear that they had already now developed a self-image and a capacity for self-consciousness.¹¹ Thus the statement in Genesis 3:7 must be read as saying that, whereas prior to the event, exposure of the erogenous parts of their bodies did not bother them, now it did. But why? Does our analysis of the Tree of Knowledge metaphor provide a credible explanation for this change?

It is to be noted that the two biological drives involved in the story are those for food ("good to be eaten") and for sex ("naked"), two of the strongest in human experience. In the case of animals, both of these

vital needs are controlled by hormones and gastric juices and limited, in the case of sex, to mating seasons and, in the case of food, to felt hunger pangs. The text implies that as a consequence of their act of “disobedience” (which was to exercise free choice in response to a fantasy-driven appetite), the desire for food and for sex in humans became permanently disconnected from any biological limitations and, if fueled by imagination and fantasy (“and their eyes were opened”), could overwhelm reason.

The text emphasizes the role of perception: “And when the woman *saw* . . . that it was a delight to the *eyes*. . .” (Gen. 3:16, implying that under the effects of a powerful imagination, one sees things differently than before.)¹² Thus, “*seeing* themselves naked” now triggered in their consciousness a number of possibilities. “And the *eyes* of them both were opened” (Gen. 3:7). What they now “saw” in their minds’ eye shocked and embarrassed them. Their effort to cover themselves suggests the societal awareness that continual exposure to sexual stimuli is distracting to everyday interaction between the sexes. Generally, the particular situation that may arouse shame is culturally determined and depends upon one’s self-image. The analysis we have offered here suggests that sometimes the experience of discomfort or embarrassment may be occasioned by our own thoughts aroused by the circumstances which may conflict with our self-image.

How does God view His creatures’ eating of the forbidden fruit? In terms of the metaphor, of course, God is displeased. However, because Adam and Eve here represent emerging *homo sapiens*, we must not judge their action in conventional terms of “sin,” or God’s reaction as “punishment,” or to look to them for “repentance.”¹³ As stated earlier, this story is designed to explain why human development has had to take such a long and difficult road. A metaphor has been employed to explain how the human being got to be the way he is.

Man’s answer to God, “The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree” (Gen. 3:12) is not mere evasion of responsibility, but an attempt to point out that he had some reason to assume that the woman, designed by God to be a “helpmeet,” could be trusted. Similarly, Woman’s references to a “serpent”—“The serpent beguiled me and I did eat” (Gen. 3:13)—is really an argument to the effect that, never having had an experience of this sort before, the persuasive “voice” she heard in her consciousness sounded “authoritative” and its message convincing. These should be read not as lame excuses, but as honest descriptions of their thinking at the time. Indeed, something

tragic had happened but since we are not talking about “sin,” there is no “blame” to be apportioned.

In His response, God addresses the three principles in reverse order: “And the Lord said to the *serpent*. . . .” (Gen. 3:14). Then, “Unto *Woman* He said. . . .” (Gen. 3:16). Finally, “And unto *Man* He said. . . .” (Gen. 3:17). However, there is no real sense of anger or retribution in His words, but rather a sad enumeration of the necessary changes in the human condition to occur as a consequence of their action.¹⁴ Because of the new alignment of reason, emotion, and imagination in Man’s psyche, a new order in the relationship between Man and nature was now required if the human was to become what he was meant to be. The old order in a garden paradise, where Man’s basic needs, as it were, “grow on trees,” will no longer serve the purpose. Man is no longer “innocent” and too much time on his hands spells trouble. The only way Man can truly learn about himself is to be confronted by existential challenges and choices so that he can, on his own, gradually discern his potential and learn to distinguish between significant opportunities and roads that go nowhere.

In contrast to a life of leisure, where the “living comes easy,” Man will now face a life of toil and struggle to provide the necessities. “By the sweat of your brow will you eat bread” (Gen. 3:19). Cast out into an indifferent world, he will ruefully remember his original blessing to be “Great Lord of all things” and his new fate to be “prey to all.”¹⁵ And if the human sex drive, grown powerful and constant under the stimulation of an active imagination, seems to defy restraint, it was now to be complicated by associating it with child-bearing, which by being painful to the woman, might encourage restraint and a sense of responsibility. Also, relations between men and women can no longer be expected to be wholly rational based on equality, but will be marked by tension and a struggle for dominance. Finally, Man in this kind of world, can no longer dream of a Tree of Life and must come to terms with his own mortality. “Dust you are and to dust you will return” (Gen. 3:19).¹⁶ And if until now “he was in doubt to deem himself a god or beast,”¹⁷ he is to know that in truth, he is neither, but only Man who, having been created in the image of God (*tselem*), can by his own efforts become like Him (*demut*).

God’s words to the serpent make sense only in a literal interpretation of the story. The creature did a deceitful thing and therefore is “cursed” by henceforth having to slither about “on its belly” (Gen. 3:14). In order to retain the inner logic of the story, the text must

include God's response to the serpent as well as to the others. But the purpose of this part of the story seems primarily etiological, that is to explain in a popular mode a natural fact that must have appeared most strange; why the snake, of all creatures, has no feet of any kind and for locomotion must slither around on its belly.¹⁸ The "answer" supplied by the story in the metaphor is that the snake was "cursed" for its role in Man's act of disobedience.

III

We suggested earlier that when, at the beginning of the story, the text refers to an *ets ha-da'at tov va-ra*, usually translated as, "the tree of knowledge of good and evil," this name shall be seen as reflecting not what eating its fruit can produce, but rather the reality of what happened after Man's "disobedience."¹⁹ How is this to be understood? First, what sort of "knowledge" is involved here? Actually, the Hebrew term *da'at* is sometimes used to refer to "acquaintanceship" (Fr. *savoir*), that is intersubjective relationship based on experience, rather than "knowledge" as cognition (Fr. *connaitre*). So, by choosing the term *da'at tov va-ra* we are talking about the human experience of those moral opposites—Good and Evil. Some have interpreted this to mean "the knowledge to distinguish between the words good and evil." However, this knowledge was already in Man's possession as a consequence of his having been created in the "image of God."²⁰ Indeed, we are told that God had forbidden Man to eat of that tree and then, when he did, held him morally responsible. This clearly implies that Man already knew that to obey is morally right and to disobey morally wrong or evil.

What then is the meaning of *da'at tov va-ra*? It is the "experience of moral good and evil," conjoined by complex circumstances and mixed motives so that it is difficult to extricate the one from the other. As we said earlier, the misuse of reason to rationalize immoral courses of action in early human development resulted in the permanent blurring of Man's moral perception and the loss of sensitivity on the part of his moral sense. So, whereas before the event in *Gan Eden*, Man experienced Good and Evil as clearly demarcated and open to decisive judgement, now, Good-Evil have become inextricably intertwined. Therefore, the "tree" of the *Gan Eden* story metaphor, so centrally involved in this fateful event, is referred to as *ets ha-da'at tov va-ra*, the tree which symbolizes Man's moral experience generally being a mixture of good and evil.²¹

IV

But what would have happened if Man had not disobeyed, had not eaten from the forbidden fruit? Was he to have remained in *Gan Eden* forever? What was God's original plan for Man? These questions involve several familiar theological issues. Did not God foresee Man's disobedience? Does not defeat of God's plan reflect upon His Omnipotence? Of course, we have a similar problem later in connection with the corruption in the days of Noah which brings God to explicitly admit, "I regret having made them" (Gen. 6:7) and decide to erase Man from the face of the earth.

There are those who maintain that the conditions for human existence that have developed on our planet during the last 10,000 years support the proposition that ours "is the best of all possible worlds." That is to say, from the point of view of the Creator who wishes to provide Man with an environment which effectively preserves his freedom in moral matters, our world, with its bewildering mixture of good and evil, joy and sadness, faith and doubt, strikes the proper balance in which free and responsible choices can be made. Accordingly, it would seem that the world that emerged after the Flood was what was anticipated by God who foresaw all that ultimately happened. On this view, texts that imply otherwise, that speak of a God who seems surprised, "regrets" having made Man and is "upset" by his actions, are designed for the casual reader in the spirit of "the Torah speaks in the language of men." However, the Garden of Eden story does suggest that God intended a far more friendly and manageable environment for Man than what, in the short term, actually came about. Indeed, we are compelled to say that the Garden of Eden would have been "the best of all possible worlds" had Man's nature developed in the intended direction, i.e., with the faculties of Man's consciousness more compartmentalized, so that intellect, emotion, and imagination would interact along more fixed paths and less subject to the vagaries of impulse and fancy.

So who or what was it that thwarted God's plan? While Judaism knows of a Satan, a *yetser ha-ra* (evil inclination), and an "Angel of Death," it knows of no independent powers of evil that are operative in the affairs of men. The "serpent," as we have already indicated, was nothing more than a metaphor for the woman's imagination. This brings us back to the elusive "freedom of choice," that most precious gift from God to Man which actually constitutes the human being.

The human sense of self is essentially that of a freely-choosing entity. By giving Man something of Himself, an element of “spirit,” God was knowingly endowing His creature with a certain autonomy and, in some sense, restricting His own.²² It is Man alone who can stand up to God and bring about changes, detours, and delays in the Divine plan for history. This is reflected in the early stories in Genesis and later, for example, in the negative response of Israel to the report of spies-scouts, which delayed their entrance into the Promised Land for decades.²³ However, in this primeval setting, the consequences were much more fateful. For this was the inaugural human exercise of free choice, its very “break-in” period during which it was to be integrated with the other human faculties. The tragic element here was that, as his very first act of free choice, Man chose to act disobediently, violating God’s command. This had an unbalancing and permanent effect upon Man’s still developing psyche, giving an edge to his imaginative faculty, and enhancing the power of the pleasure principle.

In terms of the metaphor, all of this comes about as the result of a single act of Adam and Eve in *Gan Eden*. However, we must understand that in reality this event refers to some drawn-out evolutionary process from hominid to *homo sapiens*, whose precise circumstances and mechanisms we may never learn.

According to the rabbinic timetable, the story of Adam and Eve in *Gan Eden* took place late afternoon of the sixth day of creation before Shabbat, before the formal completion of the cosmos. Thus God’s pronouncement, “And God saw everything that He had made and behold it was very good” (Gen. 1:31), comes afterwards and encompasses the changes that came about in Man’s nature and in his relationship to the environment. That is to say, even after Man’s expulsion from the Garden, mankind will still be able to achieve its divinely appointed destiny. It will, however, be much more difficult, more costly, and will take much longer. Can we therefore say that from the Biblical point of view ours is still “the best of all possible worlds?” Well, “best” perhaps from God’s perspective and “possible” taking into consideration the limitations of the post-paradisiacal reality of the human psyche. This is clear from the Biblical narrative itself. After all of His earlier regrets, God is prepared to try again with the Noahide survivors of the Flood, and promises, “Neither will I smite any more every living thing as I have done” (Gen 8:21). For all intents and purposes, then, history is back on track and God’s plan proceeds to go forward. So much for Biblical exegesis.

V

In our day, however, questions as to the worthwhileness of life (is it truly “very good”?) have been reopened and upgraded to the more serious level of “existential.” That is to say, this issue is not seen simply as an intellectual puzzle to be solved by some nice theory or lofty philosophy. The individual lives his life every minute of every day and his subjective experience cannot be ignored. After all, whether something is to be designated “good” is a value judgement and cannot be objectively considered unless some specific criterion can be agreed upon in advance.

In its own development, Judaism has not been content to leave the matter with the “very good” pronouncement of Genesis 1:31. Thus, for example, included in the canon of Holy Scripture, is *Kohelet*, whose question, “What remains to a man from all of his toil which he toils under the sun?” (1:3) remains largely unanswered. During the Talmudic period, the rabbis reported a debate which continued for about two years over the question, “Is it better for man to have been created or rather not to have been created?”²⁴

But surely if the Bible states that all that God made, including the human being, was “very good,” how could the rabbis even raise this question? Perhaps, by this time, Jewish thought had become analytic enough to legitimize a distinction between a view of things as seen from the view of God (as found in the Pentateuch) and a view of things as seen by autonomous man. For it can be acknowledged that God’s purposes can indeed be achieved under existing conditions. However, one can still ask, is it in the interests of the individual human being to be part of what we call “life”?²⁵

In terms of Judaism, man is a free and responsible human being who may or may not fulfill his destiny as a human being and/or as a Jew. In either case, he will be held accountable for what he does with his life. The stakes are enormous with the consequences of either success or failure touching upon the very meaning of one’s life. The question therefore is, given this particular person’s chances for success or failure, would it perhaps have been better for him never to have been created and therefore never to have had to run the risk of failure? But then he would never have had the opportunity to achieve whatever it is that Judaism holds out as the supreme reward.

How one answers this question would appear to depend upon one’s assumptions as to the following: 1) The probabilities of the “average” person succeeding or failing; 2) The positive value to be assigned to success and the negative value to failure. The fact that the issue was

debated for so long, indicates that rabbinic opinion was divided over these basic assumptions and that both views were considered acceptable within the framework of the Jewish world-view. That a majority could have been found in favor of the more pessimistic view should not surprise us, as many of the rabbis tended to see this approach as having didactic value.²⁶

VI

However, if the rabbis were not all that convinced that existence is an unmixed blessing, why did a “good” God persist in creating him? Indeed, the rabbis remained quite sensitive to this question and found an opportunity early in Genesis to express their unease.

In describing the creation of Man, there is this very problematic text: “And God said, ‘Let us make a Man in Our image and in Our likeness’” (Gen. 1:26). To whom was God speaking? Indeed, early on, critics would point to this verse as evidence that the Israelite God presided over a pantheon.²⁷ In Aggadic literature, however, there are at least three different *midrashim* in which the rabbis interpret this verse to mean that God took counsel with His ministering angels as to whether He should create Man. After inquiring as to the nature of this proposed creature and his deeds, the angels invariably advise against it. God’s particular response in each *midrash* is different. What they have in common, however, is that God finds a way to ignore their advice and proceeds to create this problematic creature on His own.²⁸

Whatever the original reason for the use of the collective in the passage, “Let us make Man,” the rabbis, with their ear for the finer nuances in the Biblical text, sensed here a suggestion of hesitancy on the part of God. After all, why the need for any advance announcement on the part of an omniscient Creator who needs neither assistance nor a second opinion? And so, the rabbis employed the textual anomaly to voice a nagging concern. Is it good even from the point of view of the values espoused by God, such as justice, righteousness, and loving kindness, for Man to have been created? After all, look at all the evil that men introduce into the world against their own kind!

The angels in the *midrashim* represent the voice of reason and common sense. Given the early record of Man’s destructive use of the divine gift of freedom of choice, the creation of Man will mean, at least initially, violence, human pain and anguish, and continuous interference with God’s goals in history. Who needs this *tsara* (trouble)?

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The issue is never explicitly joined as God does not respond substantively even when confronted by the angels with irrefutable evidence of Man's evil. However, the most poignant of the *midrashim* ends with God citing the following cryptic passage from Isaiah:

Even to old age I am He
And even to grey hair will I carry you
I have made and I will bear
Yes, I will carry and I will redeem (46:4).

The words echo a certain sadness and one can detect a note of resignation. But there is at the same time a sort of reassurance. God accepts responsibility for what He has done ("I have made and I will bear [with patience]") no matter how long it takes ("Even to old age . . . and to grey hair"). The six-fold repetition of the personal pronoun, the divine "I," implies that this entire conundrum defies our understanding because it emanates from the unique unknowable subjectivity, the "I" which is God, He who is beyond space and time and paradoxically incorporates both justice and mercy, rationality and love. In the end, however, He who created Man against all counsel has faith in His creatures and He will yet redeem.

Here the Sages are saying more than that this problem is beyond rational explication. They are suggesting that because creation, in ways we have examined, is not perfect, God, the Creator, may be viewed as a tragic figure. "My soul shall weep in secret [*mistarim*]" (Jer. 13:17). Say the Rabbis, "The Holy One, Blessed be He, has a place called *mistarim* where He goes to weep."²⁹ God, it would seem at this point, will do no more. However, here it is Man who can and ought to. "They brought matters to a vote and concluded: 'It would have been better for Man not to have been created, but now that he is here, let him look to his deeds.'"³⁰

NOTES

1. See Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, II:30.
2. For a brief scholarly, yet balanced approach, see Yechezkal Kaufman, *The Religion of Israel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 292-94. For a truly contemporary comprehensive analysis, see Leon R. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 54-122.
3. The basic elements in my approach are derived from the interpretations of Isaac Abarbanel to Gen. 3:1-5; R. Meir Leibush Malbum to Gen. 2:16, 17 and Gen. 3:3-7; and comments of Martin Buber, *Good and Evil* (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1958), 67-80.
4. Shubert Spero, "The Biblical Stories of Creation, Garden of Eden and the Flood: History or Metaphor?" *Tradition* 33:2 (1999), esp. n. 18.
5. While in fact, Adam and Eve do not die on the day they eat of the tree, they lose their chance to eat of the Tree of Life and so become subject to death (Ramban). Since the Tree of Eternal Life never actually comes into play and the Tree of Knowledge is prohibited, one cannot but be struck by the incongruity of these two mythic "trees" being placed, as it were, inconspicuously in the midst of a garden of 'real' fruit trees, "pleasant to the sight and good for food" (Gen. 2:9). In the popular mythology of Mesopotamia, the images of a Tree of Eternal Life and probably of a Tree of Knowledge were well known. Since life-eternal and knowledge were much valued and sought after by Man and since life-eternal and knowledge were possessed by the gods, it was useful to think of them as natural products growing on special trees so that all that one had to do to acquire either of them was to locate the trees. The ploy of the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge in the midst of the primeval garden, which serve only as stage props for the main drama of Man's disobedience, was perhaps intended to de-sacralize the concept and show its irrelevance. The point being, that elements such as Eternal Life and Knowledge do not grow on trees and cannot be acquired simply by taking a suitable "pill."
6. The manner in which Woman is formed and presented to Man has been seen as a mother lode of hints and insights as to the proper relationship between the sexes from the Talmudic Sages up through modern commentators. See *The Beginning of Wisdom*, 98-151 and Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Family Redeemed* (New York: Me-Otzar HaRav, 2000), 3-31.
7. According to Abarbanel (Gen. 3:1), the woman repeatedly saw the serpent coiled around the tree's branches and eating of its fruits with no apparent ill effects. This triggers the "conversation" with the serpent.
8. Of course, the original prohibition spoke only of "eating" and not of "touching." From this, the rabbis derive the teaching what whoever adds to the command of God ends up reducing it (see Rashi on Gen. 3:3).
9. However, in connection with Cain's act of fratricide, the word *het* is used. See Gen. 4:7.
10. Rashi on Gen. 2:8.
11. See *Genesis Rabba* 17:5. After naming the various animals, God asks Man, "And what is your name?" To which he replies, "It is proper that I be

called Adam, for I have been created from the *adama* [earth].” “And what is My name?” asks God. Man answers, “It is proper that You be called *Ado-nai* for you are the master [*adon*] of all of Your creatures.”

12. See Rashi on Num. 15:39.
13. The Christian view as set forth by Augustine is that Adam was created good and intelligent. Since he was endowed with free will and could have chosen not to sin, he and Eve’s eating of the forbidden fruit was committed in willfulness and pride. After this “fall,” they, and all of their descendants, have been in a state of “original sin” from which no one can escape by his own efforts and is dependent upon God’s love and grace in order to be redeemed.
- Judaism must reject such a view, both in terms of theology and Biblical exegesis. Judaism believes that every living human being has the freedom to resist and overcome sin, will be judged by his own merit, and is not burdened by the sins of others. See Deut. 30:15, 19 and Gen. 4:7. Nowhere in the Biblical story is Man, as such, “cursed” for what happened. Even if Adam “sinned,” it would not be just to punish the children for the sins of the parents.
14. In the story, God “curses” the snake and the earth because of Man. However, God does not curse Adam or Eve.
15. Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man*, epistle II.
16. Before expelling Man from the Garden, God says, “Behold, the man has become *ke-ehad mi-menu* (as one of us), to know good and evil and now lest he take also from the Tree of Life and eat and live forever” (Gen 3:22). This passage as translated above, presents many difficulties. For creative translations and interpretations, see Rashi, Malbim and R. David Tzvi Hoffmann on Gen. 3:22. Perhaps it can be read as follows: “Behold, Man has become unique in his class of earthly creatures [by virtue of his freedom of choice], as I [God] am above, but since good and evil have become so intertwined that Man has difficulty choosing the good, he cannot be permitted to live forever lest they delude themselves into thinking they are gods!”
17. Pope, *ibid*.
18. I have written elsewhere on the use of different types of metaphor in the Bible (“The Biblical Stories of Creation, Garden of Eden and the Flood: History or Metaphor?”, *Tradition* 33:2 (1999)). While there can be no doubt that the Torah intended later generations to interpret the *Gan Eden* story in the light of their growing understanding of the human psyche, the story, even taken literally, imparts a coherent message. It would appear from the discoveries of the cultures of the Middle East that in the cases of the Garden of Eden and the Flood, the Torah used material from Mesopotamian legends—images familiar to the people—and by recasting them and infusing the product with the prophetic spirit, turned it into an instrument for Torah teaching.

Parables that are invented *de novo* for a particular occasion can be stripped of all irrelevant material, so that they emphasize only those features which the *mashal* and the *nimshal* share, such as Isaiah’s parable of the vineyard or the “steaming pot” of Jeremiah. In our case, however,

where one starts with an already existing plot and cast of characters, one may not be able to find a right application for every one of the minor elements in the parable. Thus, I argued in the above cited article, that in its broad outlines, the Bible Flood story may be generalized to represent the many destructions and extinctions that took place on this planet up to and including the Ice Ages. However, I could not generalize certain details in the story, such as the sending out of the raven and dove to see if the waters had receded. (Interestingly, these details appear in the Babylonian Flood story, but in reverse order.) I would answer that these also served an etiological purpose in “explaining” certain observed characteristics of these birds. However, the fact that these details have been retained in the Torah text might signify that *nitnu lidrosh*, each generation is to find therein meaningful homiletical interpretation. A sort of precedent for this approach might be seen in the insight of the Sages, that although a dream may, in the main, have prophetic significance, some details in the dream may resist the overall interpretation and remain non-prophetic or even *devarim beteilim*. See Rashi on Gen. 36:10.

We find the Trees of Life and the snake playing prominent roles in the mythology of ancient Mesopotamia. The snake is usually cast as clever, powerful, and malicious, and is a symbol of male superiority (Jeremy Black and Anthony Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia* (British Museum Press: 1992).

In line with our interpretation that the snake in the story represents the “evil inclination,” the “curse” it receives seems appropriate. For once the evil inclination is recognized for what it is, it must go about its business by “slithering about,” camouflaged, striking by surprise by injecting the poison of desire.

19. See R. David Tzvi Hoffmann on Gen. 2:17.
20. See *Genesis Rabba* 16:9 on Gen. 2:16, 17: “And the Lord God commanded [*va-yetsav*] the man saying: But of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil you shall not eat. . . .” Here, the Sages found an indication that in this, God’s first “command” (*mitsva*) to Man, there were included six of the seven Noahide laws. That is to say, from this point on, Man was already endowed with a moral sense.
21. See commentary of the Malbim on Gen. 2:16, 17 and on Gen. 3:3-7.
22. Two ideas we have elaborated in this essay have their analogues in the mystical literature of the Kabbalah:
 - 1) In the first, we stated that the creation of Man did not eventuate as originally planned. Somehow, while evolving into *homo sapiens*, Man, exercising his will, made the choice that upset the delicate balance between reason, emotion, and imagination. Because of this, history took the chaotic course we are familiar with. In Lurianic Kabbalah, there is the complex doctrine called “breaking of the vessels” (*shevirat ha-keilim*). It seems that the cosmic process required that the Divine Light, which flowed into the primordial space, differentiate into individual beams of the *sefirot* that required bowls or vessels to hold them. For reasons that are in dispute, there was an “accident” in which the vessels of some of the *sefirot* could not contain the powerful light and so were broken or shattered and the

light scattered. According to the theory this event is “the cause of that inner deficiency which is inherent in everything that exists and of the power that evil enjoys and will persist as long as the damage is not mended (*tikkun*)” (Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1941), 265-68).

2) We have stated that by allowing Man freedom of will, God placed certain limitations on His own power. The analogue in Kabbalah is the concept of *tsimtsum*, which means “concentration,” or “contraction,” or “withdrawal.” If God is everywhere, where is there room for the world? How can there be things that are not God? Thus, God had to withdraw into Himself, abandon a region within Himself, and leave a primordial space in which the world could appear. Scholem calls this, “One of the most amazing and far-reaching conceptions ever put forward in the whole history of Kabbalism” (260-61). Kabbalah placed the “blame” for an imperfect universe on some technical flaw in the cosmos. We have located it in a misuse by Man of his freedom of will.

23. Num. 14:28-35.

24. *Eiruvin* 13b.

25. I would think that most individuals in the developed countries, if asked this question at middle age, would answer that they are happy to have been born. Clearly, from the individual subjective viewpoint, much depends on the particular slice of life one has been apportioned.

26. See *Avot* 4:30, 3:1. See also Shubert Spero, “Is Judaism an Optimistic Religion?” *Tradition* 4:1 (1961); reprinted in *A Treasury of Tradition*, ed. Norman Lamm and Walter Wurzburger (New York: Hebrew Publishing Co., 1967), 203-20. In discussing the possible outcomes of Pascal’s Wager, William James points out that the individual has little to lose and much to gain in making the “leap of faith.”

27. See Rashi on Gen. 1:26, who states that God was willing to take the risk of being misunderstood as long as He could teach a moral lesson that it is proper for even those recognized as superior to take counsel with those on the lower rung of authority.

28. In a *midrash* wherein the angels representing moral values come up with a tie vote, God hurls one of the opposing angels down to the earth so that the vote is now in favor of creation. In another *midrash*, after the angels present God with a unanimous negative vote, God replies: “[Sorry folks] you are too late, I have already created him.”

29. *Hagiga* 5b.

30. *Ibid.*